



Iori Miyazawa

OTHERSIDE PICNIC



Yamanoke Presence

VISIT...

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File 9: Yamanoke Presence

1

Back when I was still just a victim...

During the time I left the house to get out from under the eyes of the cult, and was hiding out in the ruins of a love hotel, I can't confidently say that I was sane. So, I'm not entirely sure why it is that I thought the big red person that embraced me from behind as I lay in the fetal position in a makeshift bed of dusty linens was my mom.

Still, for some reason, the experience was a warm memory for me.

That was why, when dawn broke, I immediately left the hotel and returned home. Then, I waited in the tatami room, alone with a tank of kerosene, for what felt like forever. I remember when night fell, and the house went dark, I felt awfully lonely.

At the time, I had a thought: *I need fire.*

—What would be a good thing to eat at the after-party when our innards were damaged by the Kotoribako?

We talked it over, and came to the conclusion that rice porridge might be good, so Toriko, Kozakura, and I had come to a Chinese rice porridge place inside the Ikebukuro Seibu department store.

We had come on the simple idea that you eat rice porridge when your stomach's not doing so well, but this place had a food therapy menu managed by the traditional Chinese medicine pharmacy next door, so it felt like it might really work for us.

"The plum rice porridge set, or the two-color rice porridge set. The ladies' set comes with kakuni pork, but maybe not enough... Have you made up your mind, Toriko?" I asked.

"The dandan noodles look good," said Toriko, who had been looking down at the menu.

Oh, come on.

“Weren’t we going to have porridge?”

“Nothing’s meaty enough. This doesn’t feel like the sort of place where we can go, ‘Here’s to a job well done! Cheers!’ either.” Toriko pursed her lips.

It was afternoon on a weekday, the place was at maybe 40% of capacity, and everyone there but us were old ladies. Nearly every drink on the menu was some sort of healthy-sounding tea. The restaurant was selling itself as a place for rice porridge and tea, so that was to be expected.

“What are you complaining about when we came to eat at a Chinese food therapy restaurant?” Kozakura said, glaring at Toriko.

“For now, let’s just order tea,” I suggested. “It looks like refills are free.”

“Oh, they are? That’s a bargain.”

“That’s how tea is in China. You ask for hot water, and can drink it several times,” Kozakura explained.

That made Toriko’s eyes widen, as if an idea had occurred to her. “Ohh! I think I might have done that in Chinatown when I was little!”

“In Yokohama?”

“No, Vancouver. Mom brought me there.”

Her mom, huh?

Whenever she talked about her family, Toriko briefly looked away. Her voice lowered slightly, too, and it took on a calm tone. When people talk as they remember their past, I’ve heard that their eyes move on their own to look in a certain direction. For Toriko, it’s down and to the left... That was probably where the memories of her lost family were in her mental map.

Figuring I should take the opportunity to try a type of tea I hadn’t drank before, I ordered kantoucha. Toriko went for sanzacha, and Kozakura had maikacha.

“What is maikacha? I can’t even imagine.”

“I don’t know, either, but it said it was supposed to help suppress irritation.”

“That certainly does seem like a good fit for you, Kozakura.”

“Yeah, I’m feeling irritated at this very moment. I hope it comes soon.”

When her maikacha came, it turned out to be rose tea. Toriko took a sip of her sanzacha, which turned out to be bittersweet. As for my kantoucha, it had a thin flavor, and was surprisingly easy to drink.

While I was sipping at the warm Chinese medicinal tea, and chewing on the pumpkin seeds that came with it, Toriko started talking. “Hey, Kozakura. What happened to Satsuki’s notes after that?”

Kozakura hesitated a moment before answering. “They’re in the DS Lab’s storage. To keep anyone from reading them.”

The DS Lab—the Dark Science Research Encouragement Association. This organization with its shady-sounding name was apparently founded as a civilian organization in the ’90s in order to carry out research on the other world, which they called UBL, the Ultrablue Landscape. Though, disappointingly, despite their impressive name, their only current work was securing past victims of the UBL, and making (hopeless) attempts at treating them. It was harsh to say this, but their work resembled the cleanup after a losing battle.

The reduced scope of their work included gathering strange items from the other world—UB artifacts. It was the DS Lab that bought the mysterious objects, like the Mirror Stone and the Infinite Seashell that we brought back.

Because the notes of Satsuki Uruma, who had vanished while working for the DS Lab, were written in indecipherable characters, they had been left alone all this time. It turned out they were in the language of the other world, and we had learned firsthand that reading them aloud could cause terrifying phenomena to occur.

“We can’t read any more? But they’re a clue for chasing after Satsuki,” Toriko said.

“Are you an imbecile? They’re beyond dangerous. If Sorawo-chan hadn’t been there, you’d have died.”

“Well, yeah, but... The Kotoribako, was it? It came out of nowhere. I was surprised.”

“I’m surprised you can write it off as a surprise.”

I kept mum as Toriko and Kozakura went back and forth. The two of them thought all that appeared was the Kotoribako, but I knew otherwise. When I read out of the notebook, Satsuki Uruma had appeared.

The Satsuki Uruma who Toriko was searching for was tied to entities on the other side of the ultrablue. Though I had realized that when I dismantled the Kotoribako, I hadn’t told the two of them, or Migiwa of the DS Lab. I didn’t even know if I should. Kozakura seemed to have accepted that Satsuki Uruma was gone, but from what I had seen, Toriko wasn’t there yet. If I wasn’t careful, Toriko might feel pushed to go into the depths of the other world alone again.

Was that what *they*, the ones who lived in the other world, wanted to lure Toriko into doing? To take her away somewhere like Satsuki Uruma?

I kept drinking tea as I thought, and the meal came as I did. “Oh, it’s here.”

“It looks good! Time to eat!”

I was pretty hungry, so I jumped at the food as soon as it was put down on the table.

Mine was the two-color rice porridge set with crab rice porridge and chicken rice porridge. Mmm, it had a gentle flavor. The salt was used sparingly, so I was grateful that it came with ebi chili and pickled Sichuan vegetables on a separate plate.

Toriko, perhaps wanting something meatier, had gone for the kakuni pork rice porridge set. The big bowl of rice porridge with kakuni pork, bok choy, and goji berry came with a separate bowl of wonton soup. Kozakura had the yamucha set, which came in a bamboo basket, and the boiled gyoza and shumai were letting off steam.

Seeing how Toriko and I were chowing down, Kozakura looked at the two of us dubiously. “Hey, are you two really all right?”

“Yeah, we don’t seem to be having any trouble. Right, Sorawo?”

“It tastes good, and I have a normal appetite...” I responded, though I was perplexed. It had only been two days since then, but the food tasted good.

That, in and of itself, seemed weird somehow.

The heinous mass of curses which ate away at the innards of women and children—the Kotoribako. We had dismantled that box, which Satsuki Uruma threw at us from the other world like some sort of hand grenade, and then somehow returned from the other world alive, but Toriko and I had taken serious organ damage... or we should have.

Yet, when we were examined afterward, we were left confused—nothing out of the ordinary was detected.

The CT image of my innards had no shadows on it. No inflammation, and no bleeding, either. There was nothing wrong with my blood. The tissue sample from my mouth and the urine test both came back fine, too. Blood pressure, vision, and hearing, all good. In other words, I was the picture of health. If I were to pinpoint something wrong, the reading for my liver was a bit high for a twenty-year-old, and I had gained a kilo (Toriko had not), but, honestly, that was all within the margin of error.

This was done in the DS Lab's expensive medical facility, so it was definitely all correct. It was a thorough physical examination, taking a full two days.

Since we had been hit by the infamous Kotoribako, I had been prepared for some aftereffects. Because of that, the result was unexpected, and it actually worried me more than it reassured me.

Okay, then what was that pain that felt like my organs were being pecked at inside of me? What was the red stuff that those red birds, which were like the embodiment of the curse, flew inside our bodies, and had come out carrying in their beaks...?

The fact was, Toriko had nearly died in front of me. I still shuddered when I remembered the moment I realized she wasn't breathing, and had no pulse.

Had they torn something out of the two of us after all...? Something important that wouldn't show in a medical checkup? I couldn't shake that worry.

Though I felt uneasy in a way that made it hard to be completely happy, if modern science said we were unharmed, there was nothing more to be done.

We had been discharged from the medical center, so we left the DS Lab building in Tameike-Sannou and headed back to Ikebukuro. To celebrate our recovery and have an after-party. Without alcohol, of course. Maybe Toriko was right, and it did feel a bit insufficient.

“Hey, your phone’s been ringing for a while now. Is that okay?” Toriko asked, and I looked down to see my phone buzzing on the table.

“Nah, it’s fine. I’m sure it’s just Karateka.”

I picked up my phone, checking it just in case, and, as expected, the one shooting messages at me was Karateka—Akari Seto, a first-year student at my school. Akari Seto, who did karate. The only kouhai at my school I had any interaction with, who I had gotten to know when she was attacked by ninja cats.

During our two-day medical examination, we’d had a lot of free time, so we were whiling the time away watching Netflix, but my luck ran out when I carelessly responded to a message Karateka sent my way. Ever since, she may have let it go to her head, because she was talking to me an awful lot.

It tended to go like this: “What are you up to now?”

“Who are you, my girlfriend?”

“Do you know this urban legend?”

“I know it, I don’t care, and your knowledge of it is shallow.”

“I found a place nearby where accidents are always happening. How about it?”

“How about what?”

They were all pointless conversations, and I tried to be as curt in my responses as I could, but she showed no sign of getting discouraged.

“One of my friends had something scary happen during a test of courage. Are you interested, Senpai?”

“Nope.”

“When I told her a bit about my experience, she seemed interested, so I was

hoping you could talk to her with me some time.”

“What’re you doing? Don’t tell anyone about that.”

“It’s cool. I haven’t told anyone about THAT.”

That message was followed by a gun emoji stamp. I furrowed my brow unconsciously.

Ever since we saved her from the ninja cats, Karateka seemed to have mistaken Toriko and me for “experts on the supernatural,” and was always coming up with new excuses to get involved with us.

It seemed she had always been interested in scary stories, but I felt she was coming on a bit strong, even considering that. When I looked at Karateka using my right eye, there was clearly something wrong with the way she spoke and acted. Was it possible my personality had influenced her...? Whatever the case, it really wasn’t good to have a ghost story maniac who was so eager to act on things.

Going to spiritual spots for a test of courage to have frightening experiences, kicking over gravestones, bringing back items...

Many of the true ghost stories I had read featured people who had crossed the line like that, and they almost always met a miserable end. I wasn’t all that attached to Karateka, but I didn’t want it to be my fault if something unfortunate happened to her.

“I’m busy eating now.”

I sent that message to terminate the conversation, then set my phone to airplane mode.

“You don’t need to talk to Karateka-chan?” Toriko asked.

“Yeah. I’m already *this* close to blocking her, but if I did she’d just hassle me at university again.”

“She respects you, right? Give her a bit of your time.”

“Well, hey, I don’t want to drag her into anything. She already knows too much, to be honest.”

“Well, yeah, but...” Toriko pursed her lips in dissatisfaction.

Her attitude towards Karateka was wavering. The fact that they were both students of Satsuki Uruma must have come as quite a shock to her. She’d always believed she was Satsuki’s only “friend.”

Despite that, when I was brusque with Karateka, Toriko didn’t look all that happy about it. I’m sure she was just superimposing herself on someone who shared her own circumstances, but that was none of my business. If I played along with the sometimes completely unhidden adulation that Toriko and Kozakura had for Satsuki Uruma, I’d go batty.

“...So, you two are planning to go there again, huh?” Kozakura asked as she chewed on a sesame dumpling.

Toriko and I looked at one another, and then I nodded.

“Yes. Though, I’m not planning to travel far this time.”

“Yeah. Sorawo and I were talking about it, and we thought we’d start with a light trip from one gate to another.”

“You say ‘light,’ but they’re pretty far apart, aren’t they? I mean, sure, the distance is technically walkable, but...”

Having walked with me the time we were dealing with the Time-space Man, Kozakura had a sense of the distance between things in the other world. Toriko nodded. “We’ll be using the AP-1 this time. That’s why we’d like to use your house as our entry point this time. Do you mind?”

Toriko’s words made Kozakura frown. “If I told you I did, would you give up? Do what you want.”

“Thanks.”

Picking up where Toriko left off, I continued. “I’m thinking we’ll gradually expand our range like this. Up until now, we haven’t traveled that far from each gate, so even though we had multiple entry points, it never made much difference. That’s why I want to secure safe routes between the gates we already know of. For the future.”

“Is there any such thing as a ‘safe route’ in that world?” Kozakura asked.

“Well, that it’s free of glitches is all I really mean by that.”

“If we leave marks—like a trail of breadcrumbs—behind us as we go, it’ll make things easier in the future, right?”

“...Well, yeah.”

There had been an awkward pause before I responded to Toriko. It was true that if we posted signs along our route, it would make later operations in the other world easier. Because then, even if I didn’t use my right eye, we could act without having to worry about glitches.

In short, Toriko would be able to act without me again...

Then again, even if we secured relatively safe routes, the rest would still be just as dangerous as before. I didn’t think I’d need to worry too much.

“After all the horrifying things you two have been through, why don’t you stop? You saw the miserable state of the people who had encounters of the fourth kind, didn’t you? I can’t believe you still want to go after seeing that. Why?”

“Hmm... I really think that we’re in a different state of consciousness on that side compared to this one,” I said.

“Huh?”

“When you have a nightmare, it’s really scary when you’re asleep, but once you’ve been awake for a while, even if you vividly recall it, that state of fear is gone, right? You’re not going to say, ‘I’ll never go to sleep again.’” I explained it to Kozakura, who was looking at me dubiously. “I think the experiences of fear we find in true ghost stories have an element of that to them, too. The teller saw something unbelievable, was shocked, and was scared senseless, but they’re able to go back to their daily life. That’s similar to a scary dream, right? I thought it was simply a matter of the homeostasis of the psyche, but the other world clearly exerts some influence on our brains, so our state of mind over there must be different from over here. That’s why, once we return to the surface world, we’re naturally able to think about going there again.”

Kozakura clutched her head. “I didn’t ask so that you could start analyzing the mechanisms of cognition. What about you, Toriko?”

“I... Yeah, I really do have to go pick up Satsuki,” Toriko said, having finished her annin tofu and set her spoon to the side. “I don’t know what she’s doing now, or what’s happened to her—maybe Satsuki’s ended up like one of the patients you showed us at the DS Lab. But that’s all the more reason for me to go get her. I mean, there isn’t anyone else searching the other world.”

“I know how you feel. I really do. Even I want to...” Swallowing whatever it was she’d started to say, Kozakura trailed off. Then, after letting out a long sigh, she seemed to notice something and asked, “What’s wrong, Sorawo-chan? Not feeling well?”

When she called my name, I realized I had been staring vacantly at my now empty plate. “No... I’m fine.”

I shook my head and looked up. I had been afraid to look at Toriko’s eyes as she talked about Satsuki Uruma.

Whenever she did, Toriko didn’t look down and to the left, or up and to the right. She looked straight ahead. It was a distant gaze, chasing after Satsuki Uruma who had gone far away. No matter what else was in front of her, it didn’t enter Toriko’s vision.

There were times I thought about it. What would have happened if Toriko had gained the power of my right eye, which tore away the veil over our perception of the other world?

I’m sure she would have used it like crazy, and gone deeper and deeper into the depths of the other world. Chasing after Satsuki Uruma, and paying no heed to me.

As I was thinking that, my eyes met Toriko’s.

“Sorawo, have you thought about what we’ll make to bring along this time?”

“Huh?”

Was there something we ought to make?

Seeing me perplexed, Toriko grinned. “Lunch boxes. We were saying we’d make them to bring on our next expedition!”

“Oh... Ohhh. Yeah, that’s right, huh?”

I recalled us saying something along those lines while we were rescuing the U.S. forces from Kisaragi Station. Because of all the accidental trips to the other world since then, I had forgotten, but I guess she'd been serious about that...?

"You're acting like it's going to be a picnic. This is exactly what worries me," said an exasperated Kozakura.

"We'll head out early, eat our lunch boxes, then come home while it's still afternoon."

Even after I said that, the dubiousness of the look Kozakura was giving us didn't relent in the slightest.

2

Saturday, 10:00 a.m., the following week.

We had met up in Kozakura's yard, and were preparing to head out.

Our guns were already put together, magazines loaded. Though, as always, I'd left assembling the rifle to Toriko. Two Makarovs, Toriko's AK-101, and my M4 CQBR. There was a high fence and some trees between us and the neighboring house, so I don't think anyone could see, but the fact we were armed with guns in a residential neighborhood of Japan still put me on edge.

"What do we do if a delivery comes now?" I asked.

"We could insist it's for survival games, or cosplay?" Toriko replied.

"If they take an interest, that'd be even more hassle."

"Delivery people don't have time for that. It'll be fine, okay?"

Now that I thought about it, we both had new equipment this time. Slings! ...By which I mean perfectly ordinary straps we could attach to our rifles, letting us hang them from our shoulders. Following a tip on a survival games blog, I tried buying something called a Magpul Multi-Mission Sling off Amazon.

Adjusting the length, I was able to hang the M4 off my shoulder.

"How's it feel, Sorawo?"

"Super easy to carry..."

“I know, right? We should’ve bought these sooner.”

“If you knew, you could have said something. I can’t believe I was lugging this heavy rifle around with just my hands.”

“It never occurred to me we could buy gun accessories on Amazon.”

It had started when I was chatting with Toriko and had mentioned it was exhausting how heavy our rifles were, and I learned about the existence of slings from her. Surprisingly, accessories that could be used with a real gun were unexpectedly cheap, and official products and high-quality replicas could be bought normally, even in Japan.

“We’re running low on bullets. Think there’s anywhere we could restock?” I said as I was counting the remaining bullets in a cardboard box, and Toriko thought about it.

“There were a few places where Satsuki left supplies in the other world, but the locations were vague, and I’m not confident I could get to them. It wouldn’t take us too far from our area of operations, though, so if I can get us there, we could try going.”

“Okay. Let’s put that one down on the to-do list.”

I did up the zipper on my backpack and rose to my feet.

“Okay, we’re heading out.”

I was calling out to her, but Kozakura gave no response. Looking over, I saw her leaning against one of the pillars of her front porch, arms crossed. She seemed to be suffering. Her brow was furrowed, and her eyes squinted.

“Kozakura-san? Is something wrong?”

When I approached, Kozakura let out a long sigh, opened her eyes, and kicked me gently in the shin.

“Ow! What was that for?!”

“Just so you know, I’m prepared for the fact that I may never see your faces again this time. I always thought I was the unemotional type, but... it still weighs on me pretty hard.”

“Kozakura...” Toriko walked over and put a hand on Kozakura’s shoulder. The difference in height between them was incredible. Looking at them like this, they were like two sisters with a large age gap.

“Mom cried a lot, too. When your partner is a soldier, you never know when they’ll go on a mission, and death is always a possibility. She said, when you see someone off, you always think this might be the last time.”

Kozakura looked dubiously at the hand on her shoulder, then glanced up to Toriko’s face.

“Do you have some advice for me, based on those sad memories?”

“For Mom, it got a bit easier on her when she joined a support group for the families of those in the military. Oh, also, she liked drawing manga, so she would draw all sorts of stuff and upload it to the—ow!”

Toriko jumped back after taking a kick to the shin.

“Okay, enough of this! I’m sorry! Sorry I said something weird!”

“Don’t just snap all of a sudden...”

“Shut up. Just go already.”

Toriko and I looked at one another.

“You don’t need to worry. It’s going to be fine, Kozakura-san,” I said.

“Yep, yep. With me and Sorawo together, we’ll be fine no matter what happens. That’s how it’s been so far, hasn’t it?”

“I really can’t understand that abnormal confidence.” Kozakura shook her head in resignation. “Well, whatever. Come back if you can. Take care of your sanity.”

Kozakura said that like she’d say, “Take care of yourselves.”

Toriko gripped the space that made up the gate with her translucent left hand. The transformation that had once only affected her fingertips had now spread to her entire hand. When that hand which sparkled in the sunshine moved, it was like a curtain was pulled back, and a grassy field that was not of this world appeared. We nodded to one another, then stepped through

together. When we passed through the cross-section marked off by the gardening poles, a moist air that was different from what we had felt a moment before, and an invaluable silence wrapped around us.

We walked between the two old totem poles at the base of the hill, and into the other world once more.

When Toriko let go, the gate closed behind us, completely severing us from the surface world.

My skin felt a bit colder than it had before. Had fall come to the other world, as it had to the surface? At this rate, we were going to need to prepare for snow in the winter.

Next to the gate sat a great mass covered by a blue plastic sheet. Once we had undone the thin ropes wrapped around it and removed the sheet, there was a red and white agricultural vehicle with a small set of treads on it. This was our AP-1. I breathed a sigh of relief despite myself.

“Thank goodness, it’s all right.”

“All right?”

“I was worrying a little about what we were going to do if it had changed in some weird way. You know, like how the U.S. forces’ robot stepped into a glitch and got turned into a monster.”

I couldn’t even imagine what happened in the other world while we were in the surface world. If there wasn’t already the precedent of the guns Toriko had left here, I doubt I’d have been able to leave our valuable AP-1 behind. The thing was expensive, after all. Enough to nearly max out my credit card...

That being the case, I was now out of money. I wasn’t done paying back my student loans, so if I didn’t bring back something from the other world, I was in serious trouble.

Toriko walked up to the AP-1, putting her bag on the roof rack. She was about to sit in her seat, too, so I called out to her.

“Help me fold up the blue sheet first.”

“Oh, right. Okay.”

Toriko and I both took hold of the sheet, brushing it off, and then making the edges match. It was a fairly large sheet, so it took some effort folding it.

Toriko looked me in the eyes, then suddenly smiled.

“What?”

“So, we’re holding the sheet, facing one another with our arms outstretched, right? I was thinking it’s a bit like we’re doing a social dance.”

“You can dance, Toriko?”

“Yes, I can! I did it in gym class at secondary school, so—oh, um, in Japan, I’d have been around the second year of middle school, I guess?”

“Hmm.”

“And you, Sorawo?”

“I feel like I got forced to do the bon odori during elementary school.”

I thought it wouldn’t measure up to her experience as I answered, but Toriko’s eyes lit up. “Teach me to do the bon odori. I’ll teach you social dance.”

“No, I don’t remember it well enough to teach it properly...”

“If we play the music, I’m sure it’ll come back to you.”

Tying up the folded blue sheet using the rope, we loaded it onto the roof rack. I put my backpack up on top of it.

Before sitting in my seat, I started the engine. The engine sounds echoing across the grassy field were reassuring to me, but at the same time I felt like they might attract the attention of something that lived on this side, and I looked around despite myself.

There were trees scattered across a sea of faded grass. Rocks with shapes that seemed to harbor some meaning. Electrical poles with severed lines. Collapsing buildings visible off in the distance.

I looked to the hilltop. We had taken the AP-1 up there before, and looked down into the marshland to the east.

“...”

“Sorawo? What’s up?”

Toriko suspiciously followed my gaze, looking up to the top of the hill.

“Can you see something?”

After a momentary glance at the profile of Toriko’s face, I shook my head.

“...Nah. I was just thinking about what course we’ll take.”

“We want to get to the gate to Jinbouchou, right? I think cutting across the hill would be fastest, but...”

“There’s Kunekunes on the other side of this hill, aren’t there? I think we can handle them, but there’s no need to go out of our way to subject ourselves to that gross experience.”

“Ohh, yeah, you’re right.” Perhaps remembering the nausea from that time, Toriko scowled and stuck her tongue out.

“There’s water on the ground there, too, and I’m not sure just how well the AP-1 can drive through it. Let’s go south around the hill, and approach from the grassy field full of glitches where we first met Abarato.”

“That’s where Hasshaku-sama appeared, though. You sure?”

“It’s not great, but if I have to choose one of the two, I’ll take it.”

“Hmm...” Toriko said as she looked around the area. “Well, in that case, why not take a course we haven’t before? Let’s go around the north of the hill, not the south.”

“North, huh?”

“Is there a problem?”

“It would suck if the AP-1 couldn’t handle the terrain, but... if it happens, it happens. We’ll deal with it then.”

“Nice, it’s settled.”

We both got into our seats. Toriko on the left, me on the right. There was a gap in between us, but not so wide we couldn’t reach across it.

“Okay, and we’re off!”

“Yeah!”

After her shout, I moved the lever to change direction. The little treads spun earnestly, slowly changing the direction of the vehicle.

“...I should have saved that cheer for after you changed direction, huh?”

“Want to do it one more time?”

“I dunno about that...”

Finally, we finished changing direction. When I pushed the lever, the AP-1 began to move forward.

3

We were moving slower than we would have if we were traveling on foot—at a speed of 3 kmph—making the scenery drift past us at the pace of a leisurely stroll.

The road was smooth after we left the gate, and the ground was more or less level. The marshland spread out to our right, the surface of the water there glittering. There were bubbles rising in some places and eddies that had formed in others, likely indicating some sort of glitch. It would be a pain to have to deal with a Kunekune if I saw one, so I made a conscious effort not to focus my eyes too far off in the distance.

“I’m keeping watch with my right eye, but just to be safe, would you mind throwing some bolts, too?” I asked.

“Okay.”

I handed her the heavy nail bag. Toriko stuffed her hand into the bag and threw the nuts and bolts she took out in the direction we were going.

The glitch density is low here, making it easy to move forward... is what I was thinking when one of the bolts she threw fell to the ground, and what looked like rainbow ferns started sprouting from it.

“Whoa, what?!” I gasped.

“It makes no sense...”

This wasn't the first time that things had made no sense. I tried not to think too much as I carefully went around it.

"We really can't let our guard down. I think I'd have seen it if we got a bit closer, but we don't want to get that close to these things to begin with."

"I'll take my throwing duties a bit more seriously..."

There was no question that things that happened in the other world were deeply tied to our perception. However, each time we encountered something as nonsensical as this, I was left with a strong impression that there was more involved than just that. It also felt slightly different from the sort of unreasonableness found in true ghost stories. Or, maybe this was born from some interaction between the other world and human cognition.

If I looked at the vast grassy field, it was by no means uniform. There was an angular rock, much like a gravestone, partially buried beneath the grass. A rotten cardboard box with multiple yellow cable-like things coming out from under it. Something that looked like a mobile which had grown upside-down out of the ground—was it artificial, or a plant that happened to be shaped that way?

There were some glitches you could tell were dangerous even without the silver halo, while some were clearly suspicious but didn't look abnormal to my right eye.

If I looked off in the distance, there was a series of electricity pylons. The power lines were wrapped around them like ivy, and on top of them there seemed to be something triangular going back and forth between the towers. Were those creatures that were active in the other world even active during the day? It could have simply been a natural phenomenon, though.

Throwing bolt after bolt, a serious expression on her face, Toriko spoke up. "Hey, where do you want to eat our lunch boxes?"

"You're thinking about that already?"

"Well, hey—I'm looking forward to it. Eating lunch boxes with you, I mean."

I felt like lately the way Toriko acted was more childish than when I first met her. Was I imagining that?

Occasionally I turned back, checking our rear.

“What’s up? Is there something behind us?” she asked.

“Nah. I was just wondering how far we’ve come.”

The AP-1 crushed the grass under its treads, leaving two trails that stretched all the way behind us. We were gradually leaving our marks on the once-blank map...

“Sorawo, you’re smiling.”

“Huh? Am I?”

“You seem tenser than usual, but also happy.”

“Don’t watch me so much...”

Despite responding to Toriko that way, I found myself agreeing. I had always wanted to do something like this ever since I had found the other world.

I’d wanted to explore this unfamiliar grassy plain—where I was the only person around—to my heart’s content.

Kozakura found it mystifying that I continued to come to the other world after the frightening experiences I’d been through, but my motive was the same as it had been from the beginning, before I’d even met Toriko.

I still vividly remembered the irritation I felt when I first encountered her. Back then, more than anything, I was shocked to learn that the Otherside was not a secret place just for me. On top of that, just as I was getting excited about how I was going to explore it, the entrance vanished right before my eyes.

If Toriko hadn’t come and found me after that, and if she hadn’t told me about the gate in Jinbouchou, I have to wonder what would have become of me without the Otherside.

Abarato, the man we met the time we encountered Hasshaku-sama, had searched incredibly hard for his vanished wife, and found a gate to the other world on his own, but I can’t imagine I would have had that level of determination. That I was here now, doing this, was thanks to Toriko being there.



I stared at Toriko, who was beside me and continuously throwing bolts.

“Hm? What?” she asked.

“No... I was just thinking. I’m glad I was able to meet you.”

“Whaa? Why so suddenly?” Toriko asked with a grin.

I’d gradually started to figure her out—she acted like this when she felt shy. I tried my best not to look away, not wanting to lose to those golden lashes and the beautiful indigo irises they framed, and... okay, she started acting weird.

“Sorawo, don’t stare so much. This is embarrassing.” She looked away, her ears red.

Though she seemed aloof, if you complimented her directly, she was more bashful about it than you might expect. I’d realized that the time we changed into swimsuits at the beach we’d wandered into in Okinawa.

I turned to look behind us; with a gulp, I opened my mouth.

“Th-The two of us, all alone like this, exploring an unfamiliar world. It makes me happy. I’m really grateful that you chose me.” I managed to get into a groove as I spoke, and the words flowed out of my mouth smoothly. “That time, you called it the closest relationship in the world. Honestly, at first, I didn’t know what you were talking about, but—”

“Wh-Whoa, whoa, whoa, hold on. What?”

Unable to take anymore, Toriko’s eyes widened and she turned back to look at me.

“What’s up, Sorawo? Don’t you think you’re acting funny today?”

“Y-You think? Aren’t I always like this?”

“No way. Not a chance. I mean, are you all right? Did you see something that messed you up?”

Now it was Toriko’s turn to stare at me, concern on her face. Taking advantage of an opening when I faltered, she pinched my cheeks. Then, as she squeezed them, Toriko said: “What should I do if you’ve gone crazy? Will hitting you or slapping you fix it? Hey—”

“Don’t rub my face!”

I shook her off, but the motion nearly made me fall out of my seat.

“Whoa, there.” Toriko reached out in time to grab my arm and pull me back. “See, that’s what happens when you get rough.”

“It was your fault, Toriko!”

My response made Toriko cackle. “Oh, good, you’re back to the usual Sorawo.”

“Why do you always rub my face? Is seeing funny faces on people that much fun?”

“Hmm, when I see you making a scary face, I get the urge to bring you back to normal, and it just happens.”

“Did I have that scary a look on my face?”

“You were looking kinda stern just now.”

Huh? You look way more stern than me... Is she being sarcastic?

Though I felt slightly irritated by that, I glanced behind us. The track—which was mostly straight, with the exception of the places we had avoided glitches—swerved around like the driver was drunk where we had been during that last exchange. While I drove on ahead, the marsh to our right grew more and more shallow, then eventually ended. The ground sloped gently upward, and I could see scattered groves of trees ahead of us.

“Just a little farther, then we turn. After that, if we head due east, we should come to the gate to Jinbouchou.”

Toriko raised her hand. “Commander, when is it lunch box time?”

“Can’t it wait until we reach the gate?”

“Whaaa. The mood won’t be right if we do it after we reach our goal. Let’s stop for a break somewhere along the way.”

The AP-1 slowly and steadily climbed the hill. For whatever faults it had, using a vehicle really did make this trip a lot less exhausting. The woods up ahead looked like the ground would be fairly level, so we’d be able to pass between

the trees.

“The mood, huh? Okay, let’s stop somewhere around here and—huh?”
Noticing something on the other side of the grove, I squinted. “Toriko, isn’t that a building? There.”

“Oh... Hey, you’re right.”

“And this sound...” When I listened closely, I could hear a constant low sound, like the grinding of some heavy object.

We looked at one another, then nodded. Toriko grabbed her AK, checked the chamber, then rested the barrel on the AP-1’s luggage rack and remained alert. I checked my M4’s bullets, too. When I began to move the AP-1 forward again, it wasn’t long before what had been hidden by the branches came fully into view.

It was a tall building made of concrete. The outside was falling apart and covered in moss and plants. On the very top of the building was a thick dish that was easily the size of a whole floor, and its circumference was made entirely of glass.

The disk was spinning slowly. The low grinding I had been hearing apparently came from it.

Stopping the AP-1, the two of us looked up at the building.

“What do you think it is, Sorawo?”

“Isn’t it an observation deck?” I answered easily. Toriko’s eyes widened.

“How can you tell?”

“There’s a place called Mt. Kanpuu in Akita, and I went there for a field trip when I was in elementary school, or something like that. I just remembered there being a revolving lookout like this there.”

“Revolving... Yeah, it is spinning around, huh? Think it’s dangerous?”

“I don’t see anything that looks like a glitch from here.”

As I looked, I moved the AP-1 closer to the building. Taking a quick glance around the area, I found an open entrance, then went down from the vehicle

and took a peek inside. It was empty inside, with a railed staircase wrapped around the central support pillar going upwards.

I turned off the engine, and we waited a while to see what would happen. There was no sign of motion, aside from the observation platform revolving above our heads.

“Seems safe enough,” Toriko said, lowering her AK. “Want to go up? The observation platform’ll give us a good view of the surrounding area, and besides —”

“It’s the perfect place for lunch?”

“Bingo!”

Toriko laughed gleefully when I finished her sentence for her. It seemed she was dead set on having lunch.

4

Was this the first building we’d been inside in the other world since the one where we’d encountered Hasshaku-sama? It looked the same on the outside, but the inside was bare, and it was hard to imagine it having ever been in use. Kisaragi Station, the Time-space Man’s ghost town, and the beach house in Okinawa had all looked like they were brought in from the surface world, but this observation deck seemed to be somewhat lacking in detail.

Almost like it was some sort of a “pseudo-building.”

Even so, the stairs were made of sturdy concrete, and they didn’t give way under our feet, though the paint on the metal railing was faded and beginning to flake. It peeled away easily when I touched it with gloves, revealing the rusted metal beneath.

In the event that something were to happen, it might’ve been better for Toriko, who was used to using firearms, to be the one leading the way. But without my right eye it was possible she wouldn’t even notice what that “something” was. That being the case, we stood shoulder to shoulder on the narrow staircase and climbed together. I used the sling to put my rifle on my

back, and held the Makarov ready as we slowly poked our heads up onto the upper floor.

“Yeah, no sign of any glitches.”

“Okay. Let’s go.”

We stepped from the staircase into the observation room.

The entire wall was made of windows, so the room was pretty bright. There was gravel and shattered glass scattered across the bare concrete floor, and a line of metal benches near the windows.

That was as much as I had seen when, beside me, Toriko shouted.

“Who’s there?!”

I turned in surprise and spotted a human figure slumped against the support pillar in the center of the observation room. I jumped and turned my gun towards them. The figure didn’t move. Their whole body was covered in baggy clothes. Their head was hidden behind a helmet with a visor, so I couldn’t see their face. No matter how I looked at it, they were...

“...An astronaut?” Toriko asked dubiously.

“A-Are they alive?”

“Doesn’t look like it.”

Toriko adjusted her grip on her AK, bringing the barrel of the rifle closer to the figure. There was no response. She hooked the barrel under the visor, and lifted it up.

The suit was empty.

“It’s empty.”

Having half expected to come face to face with a corpse, I let out an unintentional sigh of relief. When Toriko retracted the barrel of her rifle, the visor lowered to its original position.

“Think they wandered in from the surface world, too?”

“From space, you mean?”

“I dunno.”

I looked up, but there was no hole in the ceiling. Just a socket for a fluorescent light. Toriko crouched down and began inspecting the spacesuit.

“There’s something written here, but... of course we can’t read it on this side.”

Now that she mentioned it, I could see corrupted text here and there.

“Hmm. I dunno what the original language was.”

“I’m not exactly an expert on the subject, but I’m pretty sure American and Japanese spacesuits don’t look like this one,” I said. Toriko cocked her head to the side.

“Is this even a spacesuit to begin with? It could be some sort of protective suit.”

“Protective suit? Against what?” I asked.

“You know, like chemical weapons.”

“Ohhh.”

As I looked at the spacesuit (?) with its legs akimbo, I started feeling somewhat nervous.

“...What do you think happened to the person wearing it?”

“Well, there’s no weird smell, and it doesn’t seem like they died wearing it,” Toriko replied.

“Did they strip out of it, then wander off somewhere else?”

“Like, they floated into the air and flew off?”

“What...?”

Thinking about this wasn’t helping. We could be sure, at the very least, that the suit wasn’t going to attack us, so we decided to leave it be and go somewhere else.

In one corner of the observation room, there was a revolving rack that had fallen over, and faded paint had been splattered on the floor around it. There

were picture postcards with watercolor paintings of scenery, photos of European-style street corners, cats, dogs, and more, along with the occasional group photo of an unfamiliar family, or an upper torso shot like you would take for an ID photograph. I didn't see a silver halo, but I picked up a few at random and put them into a Ziploc bag. Hopefully, they would help pad my wallet somewhat.

There was a large pair of binoculars installed in there, as you would expect for an observational platform. It was the coin-operated variety, but I couldn't convince myself to bother trying it. If I accidentally ended up looking at a Kunekune, that would ruin my day, to say the least..

Once we had been around the room once, we returned to the windows to look out.

"It's quite a view, isn't it?"

"Nah, it's nothing that special."

Toriko was just saying whatever came to mind, so I retorted despite myself.

The fact was, this observational platform had been built on what was practically flat land, so most of the view was just branches from the surrounding forest.

Looking to the south, near the marsh, was the hill we had left behind. To the east was the destination of this trip, the skeletal building with a gate that led to Jinbouchou. A little further north were mountains, and the mountainside was covered densely with trees. On the west side, far in the distance I could see something that looked like a bridge.

This observational platform had been spinning all this time, but... what was the power source? There had been light bulbs that lit up without electricity at Kisaragi Station for some reason, too. It didn't have the silver halo, so it didn't seem to be a glitch or a UB artifact.

"Well, it seems safe, so how about those lunch boxes?" Toriko asked in a cheery voice, making me look at her half in disbelief.

"We're really going to eat here?"

“Can’t we?”

“I won’t say we can’t, but... Don’t you feel uneasy? I feel eyes—”

“Eyes? Whose?”

“Um, well. Y...”

Turning around, my eyes fell on the empty spacesuit (we’ll just call it that) sitting in the center of the observation room. I could see the two of us reflected in the visor.

“Ohhh, I get it... Okay, well, let’s do this, then.” Toriko turned around and walked toward the spacesuit. She crouched down, grabbed it under the armpits, and started dragging it over toward us.

“Huh, what? Wh-What are you doing with that?”

“You feel uneasy because you think it’s watching. If we have it sit here...”

While I looked on in exasperation, Toriko sat the spacesuit down on one of the benches by the windows. Then she plopped herself down next to it, putting her arm around the spacesuit’s shoulders and giving me a thumbs-up.

“Look, see? Now it just looks like a person looking out from the observational platform.”

I watched Toriko as she spoke with obvious satisfaction, then shook my head. “Toriko, there are times when I think you’re seriously insane.”

5

Sitting on the bench beside the spacesuit, we opened the lunch boxes we had pulled out of our packs.

Toriko’s was a small basket of sandwiches. There were colorful napkins laid out, and they looked pretty. Toriko pointed to them one after another, explaining the fillings of her sandwiches.

“This one’s ham, cheese, and cucumber, and this one’s cream cheese. This one’s peanut butter and strawberry jam. This one’s Nutella. Oh, and there’s this.” She opened two plastic food containers and revealed chicken salad and

cut fruits.

“Well, aren’t you fancy.”

“How so? This is pretty normal. What’d you bring, Sorawo? Show me already.”

“Oh, geez. Fine.”

Toriko was breathing heavily as she watched me open the lid of my own plastic food container. If she had a tail, it would have been whipping back and forth.

“I don’t think it’s anything to get so excited about...”

Pollock roe onigiri, chicken karaage, a salad of edamame and hijiki, mashed tofu salad with spinach, and meatballs in bean sauce. When Toriko saw the contents of the container, she let out a cheer.

“Wow, it’s an actual lunch box! Did you make it yourself?”

“...It’s frozen food. Along with instant food, and ready-made stuff from the supermarket.”

“And the onigiri?”

“The one thing I made myself.”

“I thought so! It’s so you.”

Huh? How so?

With no regard to my confusion, Toriko pulled a water bottle out of her luggage with a smile.

“I brought coffee. You’ll have some, right?”

“Oh, sure. I’d love some.”

When she poured the coffee into paper cups, that familiar scent rose together with the steam.

Now that she mentioned it, it hadn’t occurred to me to bring a drink. Portable water was heavy enough on its own, and I didn’t want to increase the load too much, but now that we had the AP-1 it was something I could think about in the

future.

“Let’s dig in.”

Using plastic plates and disposable chopsticks, we shared the contents of our lunch boxes and started eating.

“The onigiri’s delicious, Sorawo.”

“I think they taste about the same no matter who makes them, but thanks.”

“No they don’t. They taste like you.”

“I used plastic wrap while I made them, okay?”

“Huh? Is that how you do it? I didn’t use plastic wrap when I made the sandwiches.”

“Uh, well... I don’t think it matters for sandwiches, does it?”

It was a bit funny imagining her cutting the bread and putting in the fillings with that see-through hand of hers. Though if Kozakura saw, I’m sure she’d say “Don’t do it with your bare hands,” or something like that.

Toriko ate the frozen karaage and the instant meatballs, and was kind enough to tell me they were good. We had the product development team’s hard work to thank for that; not any skill of mine, though.

“Oh, right.”

Toriko set her chopsticks down, poured a little more coffee into a paper cup, and stood up. She walked to the neighboring bench, and laid it next to the spacesuit looking out the window.

“That for the suit?” I asked.

“Yeah. I was starting to feel bad that we were the only ones eating.”

“Well, me too, then.”

I took another paper cup, put a bit of the spinach with tofu and sesame sauce in it, and stood up. I put it next to the cup of coffee, along with a spare set of chopsticks.

“I guess it kind of looks like an offering now.”

“Maybe we’ll get a blessing for it.”

Returning to our original bench, I looked out the window. Because the platform was revolving, the scenery outside was slowly changing. The branches of dense woods beneath us were a deep green, and the quiet afternoon sun cast lattice-like shadows on the floor by the windows.

Huh?

Something about that struck me as odd, but I couldn’t really put it into words all that well.

“Hey, I’m gonna take the last karaage, okay?” Toriko, who was sitting beside me, said.

“Oh, sure. Let me have that sandwich, then. I thought peanut butter and jam would be too sweet, but it’s really not.”

“There’s sweetened and unsweetened peanut butter. I’ve liked this kind since I was a kid.”

“Hmm. It’s my first time eating it, but it tastes good.”

“Oh, good. I’ll make these again.”

There hadn’t been much food to begin with, so it took no time at all for the two of us to finish eating.

“Satisfied now, Toriko?”

“Yeah. I’ll be coming back, though.”

“Maybe we should’ve brought some soup base?”

“Good idea! And if we brought a gas stove, we could boil water.”

“Then we could make ramen, couldn’t we?”

“Let’s try cooking next time.”

It felt like we were discussing camping plans, but this wasn’t some park we were in, it was the other world. Like Kozakura said, though it was a bit late to be bringing it up now, having a relaxed picnic like this was pretty crazy.

“Want another coffee, Sorawo?”

“Oh, sure. Come to think of it, I just remembered I still have a mooncake I bought at that Chinese rice porridge place we went to. This seems like a good time, so let’s share it.”

“You’re the best, Sorawo!”

“You know it.”

Once we had put away the empty basket and plastic containers, I split the mooncake in two, and then stared out the window as we nibbled at it between sips of coffee.

Feeling a little relaxed, I asked, “Hey, Toriko, why were you so eager to eat our lunch boxes?”

“Hmm? It seemed like it’d be fun.”

“Well, yeah, it was definitely fun. But you have a way of getting worked up about things sometimes, like when we went to the beach in Okinawa. The one who wants to do things we probably shouldn’t be doing in the other world is you, not me.”

“Do I?”

“You do.”

Toriko went mum for a little while. “It was kind of frustrating,” she finally said.

“What was?”

“When Satsuki brought me to the other world, if I’m being honest, I didn’t really get it... Just how scary of a place this is. Or how abnormal. I didn’t know what was here, other than us. That’s why, when I saw this unfamiliar place, I got all excited about what we were going to do—and then Satsuki vanished before I could do any of it.”

Toriko lowered her eyes as she continued.

“That always frustrated me. When I started playing with you, I made a decision not to hold myself back anymore. I was going to do all the things I wanted us to do together. That’s why I may have been a little pushy. Sorry.”

“Nah.” I shook my head. “I can understand the frustration. It’s a bit different

for me, but... when I'm under pressure, I can never be passive."

"What do you mean?"

"I told you before, right? My family fell apart when they joined this weird cult. Oh, this was after Mom died, so it was everyone but her. I was abducted for some sort of ritual, and there was trouble at school, too..."

The more I said, the darker Toriko's face got.

"Huh? Didn't we talk about this before?"

Toriko shook her head.

"Oh. Well, it's not really worth bringing up, but I started getting angrier and angrier. Like, why do these guys get to control my life? That's why I decided not to be a victim anymore."

"...What does that mean?"

"Whether I ran from the cult or fought them, for as long as I thought of myself as a poor victim, they'd continue to rule my life. That's why I changed my way of thinking. They had nothing to do with my life—I was the only one in control. If they were going to get in the way of that, it was simple: I would just destroy everything."

"And... how did that go?"

"It's almost disappointing, but they all died before I could do anything, and the cult was wiped out. All's well that ends well, I guess."

"..."

As I spoke, one thing started to make sense to me. If I set my mind to it, it was possible for me to stop being a victim. But I'd never had an answer to the question of... if I wasn't a victim, what was I? I had no intent of becoming a victimizer. I didn't want to hurt anyone. It's not like there was some binary option of being a victim or victimizer, but I felt like I was hovering somewhere in between the two.

That's when I met Toriko, and she gave me that word.

Accomplices.

The concept hadn't felt right to me at first, so I wonder when it became so important to me? With that one word, Toriko gave me a new place to be.

When I realized Toriko was silent, I panicked.

"Oh! I'm sorry. For talking about this silly stuff, I mean. Basically, what I'm trying to say here is—"

Mid-sentence, Toriko suddenly hugged me.

"Guh."

"..."

"To-Toriko-san? You're making it hard to breathe. What's up?"

"I'm sorry. I never realized."

"Nah... How could you have? I never said anything."

Come to think of it, I had spoken to Kozakura about this before, hadn't I? I guess Kozakura never told Toriko.

Toriko hugged me and didn't let go. It seemed like I'd given her a shock. When I breathed in the scent of shampoo from her hair, along with Toriko's own sweet smell, it somehow calmed me.

Still, what was such a shock to her?

I stared out the window as I patted her on the back. The red of the sunset slowly cut across the revolving observational platform's windows.

"...Huh?"

A moment later, it hit me.

"To-Toriko! This might be bad."

"Huh?"

"The sun's going down!"

Toriko stopped hugging me and then turned to look, her eyes widening.

"No way! It shouldn't be that time yet."

"We need to leave right away. We gotta reach the gate before it gets dark!"

We hurriedly packed our bags, raced down the stairs, then headed out through the open doorway.

“Wha...?!”

I shouted despite myself. The AP-1, which had been parked in front of the building, had disappeared. Even as we stood there in a state of shock, the sky above the treetops was rapidly darkening.

Night was coming. The terrifying night of the other world.

6

“Sorry, Sorawo, I didn’t notice the time going by.”

“No... It shouldn’t be night so soon. Even if we add together the time it took to search the observation platform and to eat lunch, it couldn’t have been more than an hour.”

Up until now, I had thought there was no difference in the passage of time between the surface and the other side, but maybe I was wrong about that. Inside the woods, it was already so dark you couldn’t see what was up ahead. The wind had picked up, rustling the branches overhead.

I took a flashlight out of my bag and turned it on. The cone of light licked at the grass beneath the trees.

“Hey, Toriko, were there always so many trees here?”

“I thought that was weird, too. It felt more sparsely wooded when we came. The AP-1 couldn’t make it through these dense trees.” As she was speaking, Toriko seemed to come to a sudden realization, and she held her AK ready. “Hold on. Are these trees monsters, then? Like, maybe they’re creeping towards us?”

I focused on my right eye and took a quick look around us.

“...Doesn’t look like it. These are all ordinary trees. I don’t know if they’re beech trees or oak, though.”

“Then why is it different from when we came?”

I pointed the flashlight down, focusing the light on the ground. I couldn't see any trace of the treads that we had left when we came. In their place, there was a gap in the trees, and a pitch-black mountain path.

"Did we come out in a different place entirely...?"

"There was only one entrance and exit, right?"

"Yeah, but..."

I turned to look back at the building behind us. I stared at the dark entrance, then looked upwards to where the round observation room was revolving with a heavy noise.

"It could be that the location of this observational platform's exit changes as it spins around. Or maybe not the location, but the state? The aspect? Something like that."

"I don't really get it."

"Before—the time when you took off without me, while I was in a glitch, I saw the aspect of the other world change. There was something in the ghost town that could look like a man sometimes, and a plant at others. While we were in that observation room, the same thing may have happened, making the woods become deeper, and the time advance to night."

"So, the observational platform moves through this... aspect? Sort of like an elevator?"

"While we were looking out from up there, there was one moment where I sort of went, 'Huh?' It felt like the forest was deeper than before. If I'd realized what was happening then, it might not—"

"Shh!" Toriko lowered her voice and cut me off. "I heard something."

"...!" I followed Toriko's example and held my rifle ready. I shut my mouth and listened closely.

She was right. I could hear fragmented voices. That sound, which resembled air leaking from a large bag, said, "Ten... Sou... Metsu."

There was a presence coming down the mountain path, making sounds like something soft being struck as it came.

“Ten... Sou... Metsu... Ten... Sou... Metsu...” the voice repeated over and over.

From the moment I heard that distinctive phrase, I knew what it was.

“...It’s a Yamanoke.”

I turned the barrel of my M4 towards the path and released the safety. It took me some time to get my left hand on the foregrip while still holding the flashlight.

“Yamanoke? What’s that?” Toriko asked as she made the same motions I was making.

“To put it simply, it’s a monster that possesses women.”

“Again...? So was the Kotoribako. There’s too many of these things going after women, don’t you think?”

The Yamanoke was a monster that a man had encountered while driving with his daughter in the navigator’s seat. It approached repeating the mysterious “Tensoumetsu,” possessed his daughter, then vanished. In order to save his daughter, who had lost her sanity, the father drove down the mountain, and ran to the nearby temple.

But...

“Ten... Sou... Metsu.”

The voice drew nearer, and its owner appeared at the entrance to the mountain path.

A white body with undefined features appeared, floating in the light of the flashlight. It had a human-like body, but no head. In place of one, there was a large human face on its chest. It had been jumping down the mountain path on its sole leg.

“Ugh,” Toriko muttered, already fed up with it. The broad grin of the face on its chest was the kind that inspired instant revulsion.

Humans react with fear to things that have human parts but are assembled wrong, or that have missing or extra parts to them. Take, for example, the Xingtian, which appears in the *Classic of Mountains and Seas*. In Pliny the Elder’s *Natural History*, it describes the Blemmyae people as having no heads,

and the Sciapodae people are described as only having one leg. It's likely that the Yamanoke comes from the same group of aberrations.

The Yamanoke came to a stop. Its eyes were staring in my direction.

"Tenguri... Sougi... Metsutsuki," it said, then turned its eyes toward Toriko.

"Tenrou... Souryou... Metsugimono."

What? What is it saying...?

As if to take advantage of our momentary confusion, the Yamanoke suddenly moved.

It hopped around at random on its one leg, waving its arms around like it was throwing a fit. It twisted its quivering body as it came towards us at a frightening speed.

Toriko and I both cringed despite ourselves—the way it moved was super unsettling. We had encountered a number of things in the other world before, but this was the first time where the way it moved was scary on its own. It was flopping around like a many-legged bug after it had been hit by insecticide. It was definitely not the way anything with human parts ought to be moving.

While we were overwhelmed by our disgust, the Yamanoke got right up in front of us. The bizarre movements came to a complete stop. When I saw its face—which had already been unbearable—grin, I couldn't hold back any longer.

"Ahhhh!" I screamed as I pulled the trigger. The barrel of my M4 flashed in the darkness, briefly dyeing the surrounding trees in shades of red. In that instant, the white body vanished as if being erased. At the same time, a bizarre shock ran through my entire body, as if I had been struck by something soft and elastic. The cartridges fell to the ground. The smell of smoke tickled my nose.

The Yamanoke was nowhere to be seen.

Toriko, are you all right? I tried to say, but the words that came out instead were: "Got in."

"Huh?" Toriko looked at me, a dubious look on her face. "What did you say?"

"Got in. Got in. Got in."

Aww, crap. It got me.

I had been possessed by the Yamanoke. At least, that's what I wanted to tell Toriko, but my mouth just kept repeating "got in," over and over again.

My mind was foggy, like I'd had too much to drink. As if my field of vision were narrowing, my existence began to fade out, starting from the edges.

At the same time, a new sensation cut in. Toriko's body in front of me began to warp. The balance of her limbs got weird, her torso twisted, and I stopped being able to recognize the parts that made up her face. When I looked down, my own arms and legs were badly twisted, and it got harder and harder to tell what was part of me and what was not.

The hand-like parts split off at the end, and fell heavily to the ground. Shocked by my body going to pieces, I let out a scream.

"Got in got in got in got in got in."

"Sorawo! What's gotten into you?!"

A large, soft, wavy, golden thing embraced me.

"Pull yourself together, Sorawo."

Tugged by that voice and fragrance, my consciousness, which had been about to drown in the madness, managed to surface once more. Clinging to Toriko, I desperately said, "My hand. My hand fell off."

"Your hand? No, you just dropped your gun."

When I looked closer, it wasn't my hand that had fallen, it was the M4 and the flashlight.

"Are you okay? What did you mean by 'got in'?"

"I-I've been possessed—by the Yamanoke!"

When I had crossed the marsh area with Kozakura, for a moment, I saw myself from the perspective of a Kunekune. In the same way, this time it was the Yamanoke's perspective that invaded my cognition. This was an even worse situation. The Yamanoke was inside me.

Catch it in my right eye, then shoot it with the gun. That was how we

defeated monsters in the other world. If it got inside me, we couldn't do that anymore.

"Okay, what should we do?"

I thought about Toriko's question. How could I look at the Yamanoke within me... look at myself...

"U-Up."

"Huh?"

"Go back, up, go back."

I tried to turn back to the observational platform. Unable to trust my own feet, I nearly fell over.

"You want me to take you back up there, right? I'll pass you your gun. Can you hold it?"

I tried to nod, but I have no confidence that I succeeded.

As I was pulled along, feeling came back to my body, although in a fragmented way. Toriko lent me her shoulder, and half dragged me into the building.

We passed through the entrance, then stopped.

The inside must have changed. What had been a bare concrete space now had a tatami floor, and the walls around it were all shoji. On the other side of an ornate lintel, there was apparently another, separate room. In the center of the Japanese-style building, a bizarre thing stood with a bright red pillar at its back. It was like a three-meter-tall art installation made by piling up mortuary tablets, candlesticks, bells, and other Buddhist altar equipment. An old wooden fish lay on top of the pile.

"What did you do?!" the pile suddenly shouted.

In a dazed tone, Toriko mumbled, "A-A priest...?"

Is that how it looks to Toriko?

I was beginning to get a vague understanding.

In the story of the Yamanoke, the father rushes into a temple to save his

daughter, who has been possessed, and the first words out of the head priest's mouth are: "What did you do?!"

The narrator, who had a frightening encounter, is scolded by a grandfather—or a Buddhist or Shinto priest—some senior figure who understands the situation. "You've done something that cannot be undone," they say, sparking even more fear. It's a horror story trope. It seemed that Toriko saw a priest, but all it looked like to me right now was a mound of garbage. I wasn't focusing on it with my right eye, so why?

Oh. I get it now.

Since earlier, I had stopped being able to recognize humans as being human. The Yamanoke inside me was screwing up my brain's ability to perceive the human body. It was the opposite of the monsters at Kisaragi Station that used the simulacra phenomenon to make people mistake the patterns on their bodies for faces.

I'm sure that just like the human OS came programmed with a facial recognition function, it must have also come with a human body recognition function, and the Yamanoke was attacking that. That's why it wasn't just my body that seemed warped, but Toriko's, too.

That was why this "head priest" didn't look even slightly human to me, and I could only perceive him as some piece of modern art.

I focused on the sensation in the palm of my hand. I was apparently still holding the M4's grip. It felt so heavy that it would probably throw me off balance if I tried to lift it up with just one hand. I managed to point the barrel at the object somehow, and I squeezed the trigger.

The barrel jumped as it sprayed bullets. The object was smashed to pieces by a hail of gunfire, and scattered across the tatami mats with a lot of noise.

"...It wasn't human, right?" Toriko asked in a stiff tone of voice. I didn't have the mental leeway to answer her, so I just vigorously shook my head. There was no way any sane person was around here.

Toriko supported me as we climbed the spiral staircase. We both looked smushed, like clay models of the human body that someone had played around

with. If I lost focus, I would no longer be able to distinguish my own clothes and equipment from the walls, stairs, and handrails that were around us.

Once we somehow crawled our way up to the observation room, I collapsed to the floor.

Raising my face, I looked to the window. I tried to see my reflection in the glass. In the meager light of the flashlight, there was a disgusting mass writhing and undulating on the floor... That was me.

In an attempt to regain human form, I caught the window in my right eye, and was left aghast.

It was no good. No matter how I looked at myself with my right eye, I didn't change in the slightest.

If my OS—if the function in my brain that was able to recognize human forms had been taken over, did that mean there was nothing I could do?

I squeezed my eyes shut, feeling like I might be crushed under the fear rising inside me.

The Yamanoke possesses people. There was nothing in the account I read about what happens to those who are possessed, but I could imagine now. I would cease to be. My very existence would. Once I was completely unable to distinguish what was and was not my own body, I would no longer be able to maintain my sense of self.

I was melting. Disappearing. My skin vanished, and my body went to pieces. All that remained was terror as all was swallowed into a muddy surge of madness.

Then—suddenly, my consciousness resurfaced. Something soft and warm was touching my surface. It traced the contours of my body, as if to draw a boundary with the floor and area around me. I clung to that sensation. Gradually, spots of feeling returned to my arms and legs. I could feel my shape coming back to me, like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle slowly being assembled.

These things stroking my body were... Toriko's hand.

“Sorawo, do you understand? Okay, breathe slowly. Can you hear my voice?”

Toriko whispered to me in a calm tone.

“To-Tori-ko.”

“Yeah. It’s going to be alright, okay? You don’t need to rush this.”

It was Toriko’s left hand that was touching me. Her clear hand, with the glove removed, stroked my head, touched my face, going from neck to arm, almost massaging me as she moved downward. The places her left hand touched gradually took back their human shape.

“Toriko, what—how?”

“I was thinking I could do something like what you’re always doing with your right eye.”

As she spoke, she went on to rub my back with both hands, not just her left. That’s where she stopped. She touched me here and there, seeming to search my back with the palms of her hands.

“There’s something here...” Toriko said in a low voice, focusing.

“One sec,” she said, and no sooner than she had, she rolled up my clothes to reveal my back.

“Whuhhuh?!”

“Sorry, I’m going to touch you a bit.”

With no regard to me and my confused cries, Toriko’s left hand stroked the skin of my back.

It’s cold.

Now that I thought about it, I had hardly ever touched her left hand directly. That was in part because she usually covered it with a glove, but maybe she was being considerate in her own way.

The left hand probing my back came to a complete stop.

“Got it.”

“Huh?”

Before I could respond, there was an impact on my back, and my head jolted

backwards.

“Whoa?!”

Slap! There was another impact. Toriko was striking my back with her open hand.

“Ow! That hurts!”

“Suck it up.”

The slaps mercilessly rained down on my stinging back.

“This guy’s stubborn...”

“What are y—Gah! St-Stop it!”

Paying no mind to my yelping, Toriko slapped away.

She was dead serious about this. Her hand came down at full force, and I couldn’t restrain my voice. Yet despite my screams, Toriko wouldn’t stop. Was she enjoying this? With eyes full of tears, I began to suspect exactly that, and between panting breaths, Toriko shouted, “How... do you like that?!”

Slap! The hardest and most painful slap yet struck the center of my back like an explosion. The shock left me short of breath, and as I coughed and sputtered, something came out of my mouth.

A whitish slug-like creature fell onto the concrete with a splat. It had two branching arm-like appendages on one end of it, and on what I assumed to be the tail end it was twisted like a spiral shell.

“There! That’s the thing that was inside you!” Toriko shouted.

This little bugger...!

I caught the white slug in my teary right eye, and searched for my gun...

But before I could, Toriko’s foot came down on the slug right before my eyes.

“Huh...?”

“Oh! Sorry, couldn’t help myself...”

When Toriko tenderly lifted her foot, the flattened slug was twitching on the concrete.

Feeling had returned to my arms and legs. Once I had fixed my clothes back into place, I managed to get to my feet. I sniffed, wiped my tears, and only then was I finally able to speak.

“Whew... Thanks, Toriko.”

“I’m glad it worked,” Toriko responded, shaking her hand.

My whole back stung. If I could look in the mirror, I was sure it was covered in bright red handprints.

“Do we have anything like fuel?” I asked Toriko, taking a match out of my bag.

7

We had no fuel on hand, so we used some of the picture postcards that were laying around as a fire starter. I tore up the dry paper and set fire to it. The slug shrank as it roasted in the little bonfire. I watched until it was charred black, then put out the fire and stomped it once more for good measure.

Even as I did that, the rotating observational platform continued to slowly spin. It gradually brightened outside the windows, and day returned once more.

“Ah! Sorawo! It’s there, it’s there!”

We had been looking out the opposite sides of the observation room, and so I rushed over to Toriko’s side.

Beneath us, I could unmistakably see the AP-1.

“It was super weird the way it appeared. Like, unyoooong,” Toriko said, making a gesture like she was stretching mochi. I let out a sigh of relief.

“Thank goodness...! With the two of us together, we might have found a gate somewhere, but...”

“There’s no replacing the AP-1, right?” Toriko hoisted her bag and started walking. “Let’s go. If we don’t hurry, it’ll get lost again.”

I shouldered my bag, too. We hurried down the stairs; there wasn’t any trace of Buddhist altar equipment in the space below the observation room. I walked out of the barren building into the light of the sun and raced to the AP-1. I

started the engine, then leapt into my seat.

“Let’s get the hell out of here.”

“You said it.”

The AP-1 drove off at top speed.

...3 kmph.

We proceeded eastward through the gaps between the trees, which were as sparse as when we came.

“...Hey, Sorawo.”

“Yeah?”

“This vehicle can handle bad terrain, but, hmm... Is there any way we could, uh... power it up a little more?”

“...Here’s hoping.”

The revolving observational platform vanished into the distance at the same speed as if we were walking. The last time I turned back, I saw the visor of the spacesuit shine as it reflected the other world’s sunlight.

Things were peaceful after that. Though the going was slow, we arrived safely at the skeletal building, and we were able to park the AP-1 in a space on the first floor.

Scaling ten floors’ worth of ladder (it was a lot of exercise having to do this every time), we got up on the roof. I leaned on the fence as I looked out over the area. It had been a while since we’d come here.

My analog watch showed the time was 4:00 p.m. I couldn’t read the numbers in the other world, but I could look at the position of the hands, so it was still usable.

“Toriko, my watch has only moved forward four hours since we entered the observational platform.”

“Same here. It felt like we spent the night there.”

“I guess there must’ve been something weird about the building itself, huh?”

If so, that might mean it was possible to use that place to move into a different aspect of the other world.

“Do you think maybe the reason Satsuki vanished is that she went to a slightly shifted place like that?” Toriko asked quietly, but I pretended not to hear.

“Let’s head back for today. We’ve achieved our primary objective. That’s pretty good when we’re still recovering.”

“...Yeah.”

Once I indicated it was time, Toriko moved away from the fence. We hid our guns, and tidied up our appearance. I pushed the down button, and waited for the elevator to arrive.

“...I’m thinking we need fire,” I said, and Toriko gave me a blank look.

“What do you mean?”

“We’re falling way short of the survival skills we’re going to need to do a serious expedition. I was a little shocked when we couldn’t immediately start a fire there.”

“You’ve got a point. I’ve gotten rusty. I’m supposed to have learned some of this stuff.”

“For the time being, our objective should be... surviving a night in the other world, I guess? We can’t do longer trips without that. It shouldn’t be impossible. Old man Abarato had been living in the other world for several days.”

“Yeah. I think that should be doable.” Toriko nodded with a serious look on her face.

“You’ve learned survival skills, Toriko?”

“It was way back. Just something we did while the family was out camping.”

“So, from your mom, the Canadian soldier?”

“No, that’s Mama.” Toriko shook her head.

“Huh?”

“You see, there was Mom and Mama.”

“Come again?” Not quite sure what she meant, I blinked and asked her,
“Uhhh? You mean your dad remarried?”

“No. There were only Mom and Mama.”

Toriko was staring at me. Like she was watching to see how I would respond.

I don't get it.

“Uhhh? If I remember, your mom was the soldier, right?”

“That's Mama.”

“And Mom is...?”

“The non-soldier.”

What is this?

There was Mama and Mom? No dad and Toriko?

I was still bewildered when I heard a ding and the elevator door opened.

“It's here, it's here.”

Still blinking, I followed Toriko into the elevator. I looked to the blank face beside me, probing for the real meaning behind her words, and Toriko looked back, suddenly smiling.

“You finally looked straight at me, Sorawo.”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“I feel like ever since we entered the other world today, you spent most of the time looking somewhere else. It was bothering me a bit how you wouldn't look me in the eye.”

“...Aren't you just imagining that?”

I looked away from Toriko, turning my eyes to the closing door.

“There you go, looking away again.”

“Oh, be quiet. I'm always like this.”

She's sharp, I thought. Then the door closed, and my vision of Satsuki Uruma standing on the roof was cut off.

Satsuki Uruma had been stalking us, from beginning to end, during this entire expedition.

She first appeared on top of the hill when we entered through the gate at Kozakura's house. I froze up at the suddenness of it, but when I realized Toriko couldn't see her at all, I was able to regain my focus.

That was in part because her presence was faint, and I couldn't feel the intense pressure that I did when we encountered her in the deep places of the other world. Her eyes were constantly fixed on Toriko, without so much as a glance to me, so I decided she was something like a hologram. If I kept quiet, Toriko would never find out. That's why I ignored her as we moved around, but it got to me that she followed us without really doing anything.

Was she going to show up again next time we went to the other world?

She wasn't going to be standing there when the elevator reached the first floor, was she?

And, um... what was the composition of Toriko's family again?

When I looked back at Toriko, she had kind of a silly grin on her face.

The elevator descended from the other world to the surface world, carrying me and my frayed heart.

File 10: Sannuki-san and Karateka-san

1

“You’ve grown a lot, Sorawo,” Toriko, who was sitting beside me, said not long after the semi-express to Hannou departed from Ikebukuro.

“What? My height?”

“Your hair.”

Toriko tried to touch my head with her right hand, so I dodged as I responded. “I haven’t cut it in a while. I think the last time was before I met you.”

“Half a year or so?”

“I guess? It’s starting to get annoying, I think. Should I cut it?”

“I think you’re fine as is.”

“You mean that?”

“Your hair is black and silky. I’m sure you’d be cute if you grew it out.”

I wasn’t the kind of person who was confident in my own appearance, but I sure didn’t mind hearing that from Toriko. “W-Well, maybe I’ll grow it out a bit then.”

“Yeah, I’m sure you’ll look great like that.” Toriko nodded happily.

To be honest, any time Toriko complimented me on my appearance, complicated feelings crossed my mind. It was clear to me that, no matter who was looking, when the two of us were side-by-side, she was the pretty one. Toriko had to be well aware she was beautiful, too.

But she didn’t hesitate to drop a compliment on me...

I was looking sideways at her as I pondered. Toriko noticed and looked me in the eye.

“Whaaaat?”

“Nothing.”

I looked away. It had been some months since we first met, but I still couldn't get used to it at all. There's a saying that goes, "You get used to beauty in three days," but that's a lie. Only someone who'd never met a truly beautiful person could say that. Today, Toriko was wearing a white V-neck shirt with light-colored denim jeans, a gray jacket, and a pair of sneakers. It was a simple outfit, but it was unfair how good Toriko made it look. I was wearing a striped sweatshirt, green cardigan, navy blue pants, and sneakers.

It had been a month since we encountered the Yamanoke. We had dived into the other world three times since then.

As we moved from the gate at Kozakura's house to the gate in Jinbouchou using the AP-1, we planted the massive number of gardening poles we had bought and wrapped fluorescent tape around the ends of the poles to make them stand out more. That had at least secured a safe, glitch-free route for us. A highway of our own creation.

"But it's possible the glitches move, and that new ones might be created, right?"

Toriko raised a fair point, but I had wanted to do this—badly. In fact, if it were possible, I'd have wanted to lay bricks, too. I'd wanted to explore and do expeditions since finding the other world. This was the first step.

I had dreamed of creating a place just for myself in an unfamiliar world. That dream had changed slightly now—it wasn't just for myself, but for both Toriko and me. A place for both of us.

"We're not gonna name the road?" Toriko asked as we were looking down from the roof of the skeletal building at the fluorescent tape reflecting the sunlight. It was on our third exploration, as we were preparing to head home.

"Name it?"

"Highways tend to have names, right? The Tokaido, the Silk Road, the Via Romana, Route 66..."

"I hadn't thought of that."

"Well then, we'll take one kanji from each of our names, and call it the Soratori Road..."

“Yeah, no.”

“Why not?!”

Pretending not to see the look of genuine shock on Toriko’s face, I said, “Let’s keep it simple... It can be Route 1. In honor of the AP-1. It’s worked real hard for us.”

“Hm... Feels too simple, but if that’s your reasoning behind it...” Toriko groaned in consternation.

“Okay, Route 1 it is,” I tried to say as flatly as possible. Internally, I was a mess. Take one kanji from each of our names? What? Just the thought of it was embarrassing...

That was how the first road on our map of the other world came to be known as Route 1.

During these three exploration trips, we prioritized safety, and refrained from going anywhere new. Instead, we made good progress collecting anything strange that came across our path. That was purely for monetary reasons. Most of the things we picked up to sell to the DS Lab through Kozakura looked like nothing but garbage, and were, but a number of them were “hits.”

First, there was a photo we picked up at the revolving observational platform. The faces of the unknown family of four in the framed monochrome picture changed day by day, and sometimes they all turned into dogs.

Next, there was a pure white shirt. Initially it just looked like a piece of laundry that had been blown away from somewhere, but on closer inspection it had been woven from living plants that resembled extremely fine daikon radish sprouts. When we found it, we realized something was off when we couldn’t lift it up off the ground, so we dug it up along with the dirt under it.

Lastly, there was a black matchbox. There was only one match inside. When we opened it, it filled with a black liquid, and it didn’t spill out even when turned upside down.

We were successfully able to get the DS Lab to buy these off us as UB artifacts. Even with splitting the money with Toriko, I made enough to live off of for the immediate future.

...Which was little comfort because, on closer consideration, we still had the loan on the AP-1 to pay. That ate up a ton of it, and my financial situation was unclear once again in no time. I was going to have to find something again soon.

The reason we were riding the Seibu-Ikebukuro Line today was to go to Kozakura's house in Shakujii-kouen and discuss the direction of our next expedition.

For the umpteenth time, I took a sideways glance at Toriko. Toriko was sitting there with an impassive look on her face, looking so calm I hated her for it.

The new information I had heard from her after our encounter with the Yamanoke had left me more than a little mixed up emotionally. It seemed she had a complicated family situation and had been raised by two mothers. "Mama" and "Mom." Was Mama the soldier? From what Kozakura had told me, they were both deceased, but I hadn't heard the details. Toriko hadn't probed at my past since then, so I figured it was probably better if I didn't ask questions, either.

That's what I thought, at least.

But why had she told me that?

Did she want me to ask after all? But I didn't know how to talk about other people's families. I had none of the subtlety for it.

Besides, I had a lot more I needed to think about, too.

The shadow of Satsuki Uruma that had been stalking us since the Yamanoke incident did not appear on future trips. It was a little bit of a surprise after how persistently she'd trailed us before, but it was actually more worrying now that she had vanished. I had turned around several times when I thought I saw her during our trips, and that aroused Toriko's suspicion. It felt like having a creepy bug hide when you looked away from it for a moment.

The train arrived at Shakujii-kouen Station. We walked the now-familiar course from the traffic circle in front of the station, through the shopping district, before continuing into the high-class residential area. Fall was in the air, and the heat of summer, which had lingered until just recently, seemed like nothing more than a lie now.

“How is Karateka-san doing lately?” Toriko asked as we were going down the hill, as if she had just suddenly remembered her.

“Ohh. She’s been quiet lately, now that you mention it. I feel like I haven’t seen her all week.”

Karateka—a girl in her first year at the same university I attended. Akari Seto. Ever since we helped her with the Ninja Cats, this willful kouhai of mine had taken a lot of interest in me. I didn’t want her hanging around me all the time, so I made a point of giving her the coolest reception I could.

“You think she finally gave up? Good, good.”

“I mean, with how cold you act, maybe she’s abandoned you? It’s not often you have a younger girl who looks up to you. You’ve got to take care of her.”

“That’s an irresponsible thing to say. The girl’s seen us carrying guns, yeah? You don’t want her sticking her head into this any deeper, do you?”

“Well, doesn’t that make providing aftercare all the more important? If she felt like it, she could have us arrested in an instant.”

“‘Aftercare’? What do you mean, exactly?” I asked.

“How about you stop giving her the cold shoulder and hear her out properly? That much should be easy.”

I glared at Toriko for saying that without a second thought. It wasn’t so easy for me, and I had already realized that, despite the self-important way Toriko was complaining, she didn’t have great communication skills herself. She could be awfully curt with people she was meeting for the first time, but then clingy around those she had opened up to. Fundamentally, she seemed unable to maintain a proper emotional distance from others.

“Besides, are you...” I started to say, then shut my mouth.

“What?”

“...Nothing.”

“Now I’m curious.”

“Don’t worry, it’s nothing.”

Besides, are you all right with that? How did Toriko feel about Akari?

They were both former students of Satsuki Uruma. Satsuki Uruma had been searching for partners to explore the other world, and during her work as a tutor, she tried to entice anyone who seemed they might prove useful. I had to wonder what she thought she was doing with high school students. Toriko had been shocked to learn her “friend” had been making contact with Akari at the same time.

I couldn’t accept the way that Toriko was still telling me I should get along with Karateka. Maybe she was saying it because the way I was so unsociable concerned her, but was there no jealousy there?

“If you’re going to start saying something, finish it! You’re making me curious.”

As I brushed off Toriko’s stubborn insistence, we arrived at Kozakura’s house. Crossing the overgrown lawn, and avoiding the gate to the other world that shimmered like a heat haze in front of the entrance, we climbed up onto the porch. Though the gate was not functional unless Toriko used her left hand to open it, I still had no desire to walk through it.

Toriko rang the bell, and then opened the front door with total familiarity.

“We’re heeeere... Oh!”

As she looked down, Toriko’s voice faded out. That made me look down, too, and I saw an unfamiliar pair of shoes left next to Kozakura’s clogs.

They were high-heeled lace-up boots.

I could hear friendly chatter from down the hall, on the left. One was Kozakura’s low voice, and the other voice was female, too. I couldn’t make out the details of the conversation, but things seemed peaceful enough.

“Who is it? Can you tell?” I asked, but Toriko shook her head.

“Other than me, Satsuki... and Migiwa, I have no idea who would come here.”

As we were talking in hushed voices, Kozakura called out from the other side of the door. “What’s taking you? Come on in.”

We looked at one another, then took off our shoes and went inside the

house. I walked down the dark corridor, and opened the door.

“Hello... Wha?!”

As I poked my head in and saw the situation, the greeting evaporated from my mouth. In the reception room, across the table from Kozakura, was none other than the person we were just talking about.

“Sorry to intrude, Senpai!”

I stood there speechless as Karateka—Akari Seto—gave me a cheery smile.



2

“Why... are you here...?”

I managed to choke the words out, but my voice was probably still a bit shaky.

Had she tailed us? Used cameras? Wiretaps? The unsettling possibilities unfolded inside my head.

Why was she at Kozakura’s house, waiting for us? Had she seen us? Heard us? How much did she know? About us? Were we going to have to m-make her disappear? No, calm down. But...

I must have looked pretty pale, because Kozakura furrowed her brow. “Hey, Sorawo-chan, what’s the matter? Are you all right?” she asked.

“Ko... Kozakura-san. Why is—”

“I hear this girl is your kouhai. She came bearing gifts, even at such a young age. That makes her more considerate than the two of you, doesn’t it?”

In Kozakura’s hands was a colorful box that contained youkan jelly. It had been pre-cut for easy eating.

My gaze slowly moved to settle on Akari’s face. “Wh... What did you come here for...?”

There was a person who, unbeknownst to me, had information about me, and was acting on it. I couldn’t stand it. Probably because of the trouble the cult had caused me.

“Says she has something to talk to you about,” Kozakura said, and Akari nodded.

“I’m here because there’s something I wanted to ask you about, Sorawo-senpai, Toriko-san. I tried to bring it up at school a number of times, Senpai, but you seem so busy lately.”

Now that she mentioned it, she had... I hadn’t thought much of it, though.

“I’d heard about Kozakura-san from Uruma-sensei. That she had a friend who lived alone in Shakujii-kouen.”

“How is that connected to me?” I asked.

“You said it yourself, Senpai. You gather in Shakujii-kouen to talk about things. That made it click. ‘Oh, it must be the same person!’”

Huh? Did I say that...? It’s true that I’ve been annoyed enough by Akari following me around that my responses have been getting pretty lazy. But would I let information slip like that...?

Maybe my confusion had shown on my face, because Akari’s eyes darted up and to the left.

...Hold on, was she tailing me after all?

“You heard her. Pretty clever kouhai you’ve got, hm?” Kozakura seemed strangely smiley in her own way. Was she excited to have a guest for the first time in a while? “How long are you going to just stand there? Sit down already.”

“Oh, right...”

Me and Toriko sat down in some empty chairs. There was tea on the table, perhaps to go with the youkan. The hot tea that Toriko and I had never been served.

“What’s the matter? Why so dazed? Make some tea for yourselves if you want,” Kozakura said.

“Right... I’ll have some.” In order to calm myself down, I put some water from the kettle into the teapot, and poured tea for Toriko and me. I took a sip and scowled despite myself. Was this tea too old? How long had it been in the canister...?

“Oh! Come to think of it, Toriko-san, you were one of Uruma-sensei’s students like me, right?” Akari let that one loose with no forewarning, and I nearly spewed my tea.

“Well, yeah,” Toriko replied nonchalantly.

“I heard she’d gone missing. Have you had any contact since—”

“Nothing, no.”

“I see... If I figure anything out, I’ll let you know, too.”

“Thanks.”

Surprisingly, I didn’t feel much of an obsession with Satsuki Uruma from the way Akari spoke. On the other hand, it was hard to tell how Toriko really felt based on her reaction. Her responses were curt, but that was always true of Toriko when she was in her shy mode. It was scary how brusque she was when we were talking to the U.S. forces at Kisaragi Station.

“More importantly, what was it you wanted to ask about? If you’re coming to Sorawo with this, something bizarre must have happened, right?” Toriko asked, and Akari nodded.

“Something has, in fact.”

“More ninja cats?”

“No, that matter’s been completely resolved. I haven’t been attacked since.”

“Well... that’s good.”

“It is. Now, about what I wanted to ask. This isn’t happening to me, it’s happening to a friend. The thing is—”

“Wh-Whoa, hold up! I haven’t said a word about helping yet,” I hurriedly tried to put a stop to this, but Kozakura raised her voice.

“What’re you saying? How about you stop being mean and help her out?”

I stared back at Kozakura.

“You can’t just abandon your kouhai when she’s in trouble. I mean, she came all this way because she relies on you, Sorawo-chan.”

“Kozakura-san...?”

I was getting more and more scared. Why would she say that? Did she like Akari that much? How was this kouhai of mine so shrewd? Had she used some unknown communication method that I could never imagine to make a difficult woman like Kozakura cave in to her?

“Um, are you sure about that, Kozakura-san? Is that really all right?” I asked.

“How so?”

“I mean, she’s one of Satsuki-san’s students. Honestly, you must have some

thoughts about that.”

“Listen, Sorawo-chan,” Kozakura said, her smile growing even stronger. “Me, I don’t want to get involved in any more creepy stories than I already have. Never. Not for anyone, okay? Do you understand?”

Oh.

“Kouhai-chan here has come all this way, so, please, stow your complaints, and help her out, or whatever it takes, and take care of this somewhere other than my house. Okay? You get it? Is what I’m saying getting through to you?”

“P... Probably, yes.”

Oh, I got it. Basically, Kozakura was pretty mad. An uninvited guest had turned up, and she was afraid of being caught up in something again... Though, if she wasn’t being played by Akari’s communication skills, that was some small relief, at least.

“...What do you think, Toriko?” I asked hesitantly. She’d been very quiet for a while now.

“I’ve been saying it all along, haven’t I? Let’s lend her a hand. A friend in need is a friend indeed.”

“Well... You would say that, Toriko.” I slumped against the back of the sofa. “*Siiiigh*, fine. I get it. I’ll hear you out.”

“Thank you so much, Senpai!”

I watched with exasperation as Akari’s face lit up. “So, what is it? This was about your friend, right? What’s attacking now?”

“There’s nothing... attacking.” Akari hesitated a moment, and then a strange name came to her lips. “Have you heard of... Sannukikano?”

3

“It was about a month ago when I got a call from my friend, Nattsun.”

“Nattsun.”

“Oh, her full name is Natsumi Ichikawa. We’ve known each other since we

were kids, and she lives real close by.”

By “close by,” she meant near the university that Akari and I both attended.

“Is she in the same year as you?”

“Oh, Nattsun’s not a student. She’s the same age as me, but her family runs a workshop. She had already started helping out there when we were in high school, and she still is now.”

“Hmm.”

“Nattsun called me, and she said, ‘There’s a weird monkey in the yard.’”

“A weird monkey?”

“She sent pictures—here, look.”

She showed me the screen of her phone—there was an image of a furry creature sitting on a garden stone. It looked like a Japanese macaque that was facing away from the camera, but when Akari slid her finger across the screen, that impression was dispelled.

“Ugh, what even is that? It’s not a monkey, right?” Toriko, who was looking at the screen with me, raised her voice.

Just as she said, the face turned towards us in the second picture was not that of a monkey. It had a human-like expression, with a faint smile, like something was funny. Its body was all monkey, though. If there was a creature that was somewhere between monkey and human, I had a feeling it would have looked a lot like this.

Akari tried to show Kozakura the screen, too, but Kozakura just leaned away with a smile still on her face. I felt a strong will to not subject herself to anything scary coming from that smile.

“According to Nattsun, this monkey talked to her.”

“Hmm. And?”

When I indicated she should go on, Akari got a mystified look on her face.

“Uh, does this kind of thing happen often, maybe?”

“Why?”

“Because you didn’t really react to hearing that the monkey spoke.”

“I mean, if cats can be ninjas, I’m sure monkeys can talk, too,” I said.

“I-I see...”

“So, what did it say?”

“Oh, right. If I recall...”

According to the explanation Akari gave, the monkey approached “Nattsun” and said this: “Sannukikano will be coming, so show her this. If you say you took it yourself, she will give you one, too. Bury it in the yard afterward.”

Then it left in a hurry. There was something that had fallen where the monkey had been, so she took a closer look, and...

“It was teeth, right? Human teeth,” I said.

Akari’s eyes widened.

“How did you know?!”

“I mean, I know that story.”

Akari, Toriko, and Kozakura’s eyes all focused on me, and I shifted around in my seat restlessly.

Sannukikano. With that distinctive of a name, it was easy for me to find it in my memories of net lore. It wasn’t a well-known story, but it went more or less the same way. If I recall, some days later, an old crone named Sannukikano did come to visit. Once the narrator did as the monkey said—showing her the teeth and saying they had taken them themselves—the crone gave them more teeth. They buried the teeth they were left with, and the story ended there. It was a strange story, with the motivations and basis for the aberration’s actions remaining unclear.

When I explained that, Akari’s eyes lit up.

“W... Wow! Wow! I knew you were the person to talk to, Senpai! I never knew there was a story like that!”

“Yeah, well, if you search online, I think you’ll find it... So, did Sannukikano come?”

“The thing about that is... Nattsun chunked the teeth.”

“Huh?”

“Ever since she did, her family has been getting hurt, strange people have followed her around, and all sorts of unpleasant things have been happening. I just happened to hear about it when I met her recently, but it sounds like it’s pretty awful. That’s why I was thinking we should get expert help.”

But I’m not an expert.

Like with the ninja cats, I felt like the stories I heard from Akari reproduced the ones I had read online almost exactly, even though the person directly experiencing the events, whether that was Akari or “Nattsun,” wasn’t familiar with the original story.

Each time the other world had tried to make contact with me before now, it had used scary stories inside my head as a sort of template. But now that I saw people who didn’t have my familiarity with net lore and true ghost stories having experiences that followed that template, the theory was on shaky ground.

No... Maybe...?

As I thought about it, Toriko spoke up. “Sounds like another one involving the other world, right?”

“Yes... maybe,” I replied half-heartedly, but a strange thought was occurring to me.

There was someone in the depths of the other world that was aware of us. On the beach in Okinawa, we had been called by our names—Sorawo Kamikoshi and Toriko Nishina—so I had no doubt of that.

Were “they” trying to harass us here in the surface world?

Could it be that this entire sequence of events—from Akari and her friend having this bizarre encounter, to their coming to us for help—was targeting Toriko and me...?

Unconsciously, my hand had gone to my right thigh. In the other world, that was where the holster with my Makarov would always be.

During the ninja cats incident, Akari found out we had guns. I couldn't take any further risk of getting busted for violating the firearm and sword law.

Still, if I wasn't going to walk around with a gun, then how was I supposed to protect myself if we encountered an entity from the other world on this side?

4

I took the Saikyo Line to Minami-Yono with Toriko and Akari, and we got on a bus at the traffic circle. If we rode for another ten minutes or so, we would arrive at the university, and right by my apartment, but this time we disembarked along the way there.

Akari was taking us to "Nattsun"'s house... or rather her family's workshop a little way off the main road.

The building bore a faded sign that read Ichikawa Automobile Repair Shop. In the workshop where the smell of oil and metal welding hung in the air, there were two vehicles: a kei car and a van. There were two legs sticking out from under the van, which had been lifted up on a jack.

"Nattsun, got a moment?" Akari called out, and the legs moved. The person who had been doing the work came out from under the van on what looked like a skateboard. It was a young woman wearing a gray jumpsuit. Her red hair with dark roots was tied up at the back of her head. My first impression, honestly, was that she looked like a delinquent.

"Akari, what's up? You message me on LINE?"

"Sure did."

"Sorry, wasn't looking."

"Geez. I *told* you to keep an eye on it."

When she talked to "Nattsun," Akari's tone was a lot more relaxed and casual than when she spoke to me. *I guess she's actually trying to be polite*, I thought as Akari indicated towards us.

"You know how I was saying I might be able to get you some expert help? Well, they're here."

“For real? Sorry to put you out like this...”

“Nattsun”’s eyes went over Akari’s shoulders... and right past me to stop on Toriko’s face. She blinked repeatedly, as if taken aback.

“Hey. The name’s Ichikawa. Kamikoshi-senpai, right? Sorry for the trouble.”

“Ah, Nattsun! No, no, that’s Toriko-san. *This* is Kamikoshi-senpai,” Akari explained.

Her eyes turned to me.

“Oh...! Huh, really? This is Kamikoshi-senpai? ...Hmm.”

Whoa, what was this attitude? Was she looking down on me? I was a bit miffed, but Akari was getting excited about something.

“They’re both experts on this kind of thing, so I’m sure they can help you, too! Tell Senpai about it.”

“Hmm, well... I don’t mind,” “Nattsun” said, looking not at all convinced. She made no attempt to hide her suspicion of me.

Well, I couldn’t blame her. I looked like a gloomy otaku, so I couldn’t imagine myself and a delinquent like her getting along all that great. If she was giving me this treatment after I came all this way here, I didn’t care much for her, either.

“Oh, it’s fine. If you don’t need me, I’ll be going—” I started to say, but Toriko cut me off.

“What’s that you’ve got there?”

Toriko was pointing at “Nattsun”’s hand. I took a look, and her dirty white-gloved hands were holding a mass of hair. There were even what looked like torn bits of flesh attached to it here and there.

“Nattsun” looked down at what she was holding, and scowled.

“This stuff’s wrapped all around the drive shaft...”

She tossed it into an empty paint can with an irritated click of her tongue, and I heard a gross splattering sound from inside.

“Heard the car wasn’t in an accident, though. Happens a lot lately.”

Toriko and I looked at one another.

“Nattsun” took off her gloves, then, reconsidering, she said, “Yeah, since you’re here already... would you mind coming with me a bit?”

“Nattsun”—Natsumi Ichikawa—took us around to the back of the workshop where the house was. When we went further around behind the old-style one-story home, there was a surprisingly large yard. They might have been landlords at some point in the past. In between the green garden trees, there were a number of large garden stones. Pointing to one of them, Natsumi said, “That’s where it was. The monkey. Was gonna snap a pic for Instagram, since you don’t see them often, but it turned this way and started talking to me. ‘Zannuki’s coming, too bad for you’ or something like that.”

“Zannuki? Not Sannukikano?” Akari interjected.

“Kano? Wuzzat?”

“No, you said it before. Quite clearly.”

“No way. I don’t remember.” Natsumi’s brow furrowed. “I dunno if it was San or Zan, or whatever, but I wasn’t hearing the monkey’s words with my ears. They were right inside my head. So, I got spooked, and the monkey bolted. Next thing I knew, there were teeth at my feet.”

“Do you still have them?” I asked, and Natsumi shook her head.

“It was creepy, so I tossed them right away. Bad idea?”

“Nah, of course you would do that.”

I couldn’t blame her. I mean, it was the logical thing to do. That she threw away the teeth was a deviation from the original net lore, but doing as the monkey said was clearly aberrant behavior to begin with.

“But still, can’t help but think I messed up. It’s all gone to hell since.”

“Gone to hell?”

“Think it was three days after the monkey? Some old lady was hanging from that tree.”

“Wha...”

She was pointing towards a pine tree at the edge of the garden. One of the thick lower branches had been cut down at an odd place, and the cut was fresh.

“Had no idea who she was, so I was at a real loss. Why’d she have to go and die in our yard...? The police came, and they asked all kinds of questions, but I didn’t have a clue.”

What? In the Sannukikano story, the old woman came, but she didn’t die there or anything.

“Everything’s been kind of crazy since... My old man got caught under a car he was working on when the jack came loose, and it busted his ribs. Mom got involved in a hit-and-run...”

“Huh?! Are they okay?!” Toriko asked.

Natsumi let out a sigh. “Both of them are in the hospital, so I gotta take care of everything around the house. There’s been all sorts of other weirdness... I get nothing but vehicles that look like they were in accidents coming in for repair, and there’s been a ton of reports of suspicious people, too. This one old fart with a knife came towards me smiling, so I bashed him with a wrench. Then I got this creepy phone call in the middle of the night that was just a woman laughing.”

“Nattsun...”

When Natsumi’s tone became more and more agitated, Akari gave her a reassuring pat on the head. Then, sighing again, Natsumi continued.

“Kamikoshi-senpai... was it? You think this is really my own fault? I heard you helped Akari before, but is there even any helping me with this?”

The way true ghost stories worked was unreasonable. It was like being forced to play a shitty game where the goal and the rules were poorly defined. On top of that, if you messed up, the penalties were massive. One mistake could mean death, madness, or a curse on your entire family.

“Senpai, isn’t this, you know, like my thing with the ninja cats?”

I nodded reluctantly. When the ninja cats attacked, the area around her got weird—that was how Akari once described the transition into the interstitial

space between the surface world and the other world.

“What should we do this time?”

“Hrm...”

As I was struggling for words, there was a tap on my shoulder, and Toriko spoke. “It’s simple, isn’t it? We just do the usual.”

“The usual?”

“You look at it with your right eye, and I—”

“Let me just remind you, we can’t use these.”

I made the shape of a gun with my right hand, and Toriko’s eyes widened.

“Oh!”

“No, not, ‘Oh!’ Geez.”

Still, after coming all this way, I knew I probably couldn’t just go home and abandon them. Even I had that much empathy. I turned to Natsumi, who was sticking close to Akari. “For now... how about we look for the missing teeth?”

5

I had the other three back away, then focused on my right eye. If the teeth the monkey gave her were from the other world, I’d be able to distinguish them by their silver halo.

However, based on past experience, that rule didn’t always apply. If I brought back a pebble from the other world, it would just be a little piece of rock with no halo in this one.

I walked around the yard, surveying the area. The grass was long, the trees overgrown, and the water in the pond was full of green algae. It was, on the whole, in a sorry state. Natsumi said she randomly discarded the teeth, so if they were here, they wouldn’t be that far away.

I turned back, looking through my left eye, and the other three looked at me and gulped. The way I was walking around, searching for a thing other people couldn’t see, I looked like a medium on one of those shows about ghosts. When

I thought of it that way, it kind of killed my enthusiasm.

“How’s it look, Senpai?” Akari shouted, but I shook my head.

“No luck. I don’t see anything that looks like it. Ichikawa-san, did you throw it this far?”

“Nah, I just kicked and scattered them, so if they’re around at all, they should be here.”

“Haven’t they already been taken?” Toriko asked plainly.

“By who?”

“Sannuki-san.”

“She just came and took them, you mean?”

“That, or maybe the lady hanging from the tree was Sannuki-san.” Toriko was just saying whatever came to mind.

“Do you think she was shocked when she wasn’t given the teeth?”

“Akari, we don’t need to dig into it,” I couldn’t help but interrupt.

I didn’t want to be made fun of for anthropomorphizing the aberrations that appeared in true ghost stories, or rather, for trying to give them motives that a human could understand. It was... a difference in interpretation, I suppose. To accept scary things as scary, and the unknowable as unknowable—that, I felt, was the proper way to interact with true ghost stories. I think it was a pretty tiresome line of thought, but I had never talked about it with anyone, so give me a break.

Well, I had put a fair number of bullets in those aberrations by this point, to be honest.

“It’s really not anywhere... Huh?”

Just as I gave up on finding the teeth and looked up, by the edge of the garden, at the foot of a ginkgo tree, I spotted an unnatural disturbance in the ground. The dirt was raised, like someone had dug there, then filled the hole back in.

“Did you find them, Sorawo?” Toriko asked.

I turned back to her. “There’s something buried here. Do you have anything we can dig with?”

Natsumi brought a shovel from the repair shop to dig. Eventually the tip of it struck something hard, and a ceramic jar appeared from under the dirt. It was big enough where I needed both hands to lift it up, and it had a white glaze on it.

Akari crouched down and scrutinized it closely. “It’s like a burial urn.”

“Ichikawa-san, do you know anything about this?” I asked.

“Nope.”

“Can we open it?”

Natsumi nodded. I took the shovel from her, hooked it under the lid of the urn, and lifted it.

“Whoa...!” I cried out despite myself. That burial urn guess hadn’t been far off mark—it was filled with a massive number of teeth.

Yellowed teeth, taken from who knows how many people, filled the urn to the brim. There were teeth with fillings, and unblemished white teeth mixed in, too. We figured the urn had been buried relatively recently.

“What is this? Gross...!” Natsumi groaned after looking into the urn.

“Can you tell if the teeth the monkey gave you are in here?”

“As if I could tell them apart. There weren’t anywhere near this many.”

“Hey, Sorawo. Here, too...”

I looked over when Toriko called my name. She was standing in front of a garden stone, looking at it. There were the same signs of the ground having been dug up, then filled back in.

We looked at each other. I silently thrust the shovel into the earth.

What came up wasn’t an urn... but bones.

For an instant, I panicked, thinking I’d turned up a human corpse, but the bone and body structure were completely different. It was likely a dog. I say “likely” because it cut off abruptly at the neck, and just the skull bones were

missing.

“Senpai... Is this one, too?”

The spot Akari found had a miniature Japanese-style house made of plain wood. It had been badly slashed with some sort of blade, and black paint had been splattered over it.

“It’s a household shrine,” I said, and Natsumi had a sudden realization.

“Seriously? This is ours.”

“It’s yours?”

“We had a household shrine in the repair shop, but I haven’t seen it in a while.”

“Does that mean someone removed and buried it?”

“It feels kinda like there’s a curse or something being cast here...” Akari said quietly.

“Do you recognize the urn or the dog?” I asked, but Natsumi shook her head.

We looked around the yard. In a span of ten minutes, we had found three items that felt like concentrated malice. If we took our time searching, there might have been even more.

Natsumi stood there, unsure of what to do. Her tough girl persona was gone, and she looked like a forlorn little girl. Akari walked over next to her and took her hand. Without saying a word, Natsumi lowered her gaze and gripped her hand in return.

“Normally, it might be best to report this to the police as harassment, but they probably aren’t going to take this seriously,” I said.

“We don’t really want to approach the police anyway,” Toriko whispered.

Honestly, there was some element of truth to that. I was feeling pretty numbed, and I had just accepted it because I had no choice, but we were anti-social university students who were violating the firearm and sword law on a daily basis.

“Let’s see if we can find anything else. Maybe if we destroy all of this it’ll

improve the situation.”

I have to admit, it was a haphazard plan, but the other three nodded.

The four of us split up and looked around the yard. In addition to the stuff that was buried, we looked for anything that seemed out of place and anything hanging from the trees. Neither Toriko or I knew what this place was originally like, so any time something caught our eye, we called Natsumi over to check it.

“Hey, Natsumi, would you happen to have been taking lessons from Satsuki, too?” Toriko subtly asked.

“Who’s Satsuki?”

“Satsuki Uruma. Tall, long black hair, wears glasses...”

“She’s talking about my tutor, Nattsun.”

With that added explanation from Akari, she seemed to get it. “Oh, I’ve seen her. We didn’t know each other, though.”

“Hmm, I see. Oh, I’m gonna go look over there.” Toriko cut off the conversation with obvious relief and headed over to some overgrown bushes on the other side of the yard. She’d asked what she wanted to, then took off. Toriko Nishina: a woman who was surprisingly inept at talking to anyone she didn’t already know...

“Ah! Toriko-san, watch your feet over there. There’s a bamboo grove in the back, so you’ll be in real trouble if you trip!” Akari called out, hurrying after Toriko. The next thing I knew, I was alone with Natsumi.

Aw, crap. I had no place calling out Toriko for her poor communication skills when I was so bad at talking to people I didn’t know myself.

“...We weren’t acquainted, no.”

I was surprised when Natsumi started talking to me.

“Huh?”

“I knew her as Akari’s tutor, ‘Satsuki-san.’ But I never liked her, you know.”

“You didn’t?”

“I dunno, the woman was scary. I saw her walking with Akari from a distance

one time, and even though I didn't do anything, she suddenly turns and looks at me. I went, 'Whoa.' It was a different type of fear than I got from the senpai at my school. She was creepy. And..."

Natsumi looked over to Akari, who was talking with Toriko on the other side of the yard, then continued. "...I was afraid she would take Akari away."

"Akari-chan? Why?"

"She was awfully close to Akari... and Akari seemed attached to her, too, in her own way. I was really worried that she was being tricked by a bad adult. I mean, she's cute, you know? That's why she's always had people calling out to her. When we were kids, I'd chase off the worst of them, but once she started taking karate, she got stronger than me."

I never asked any of this, but Natsumi went on, as if deriding herself.

"Even now, Akari will tell me, 'You're so tough and reliable, Nattsun,' but honestly she's way stronger. I mean, in high school, she won a local tournament and went to the nationals. There's nothing I can do for her anymore, is there?"

"Ichikawa-san..."

I was shaken.

Why're you telling me, a total stranger, your life story like this? Scary... Or what? Are you another woman who can't keep a proper emotional distance from other people? If so, even though she's a delinquent, there might be some common ground between us, I was thinking when Natsumi turned and looked at me.

"Honestly, I was wary of 'Kamikoshi-senpai,' too."

"Huh?"

"Akari was always telling me how great you are, Senpai. Like, how you saved her from ninja cats? Or something? And how you're super reliable. Then I heard you were connected to that tutor, and I thought you were bad news, too."

"I'm not connected to her, Toriko is..."

"Ah, yeah, I got the shivers the first time I saw Toriko-san. I thought, if it was a beauty like her, I couldn't blame Akari for praising her. But when I heard that

you're 'Kamikoshi-senpai,' I went, 'Huh?'"

"Huh?"

Huh?

"But... You really are an expert, huh? Sorry I was rude."

Was rude? She was still being rude to me, now, in the present tense, wasn't she?

"Your personality is a real mystery, Kamikoshi-senpai. You look like a gloomy otaku, but you don't get scared like I'd expect."

"You don't have to tell me every single thing you think, okay?!"

I had been through some scary stuff before now, but I still couldn't quite get used to terror and malice. If there was one thing that separated me from Akari and Natsumi, it was experience. I couldn't deny that the reason this delinquent didn't scare me was because I could shoot her any time.

Natsumi lowered her head. "I don't really get it, but I did something wrong, and that's brought a curse or something on us, right? That's what this is," she mumbled.

Her sudden shift from rude mode to depressed mode was too much for me to keep up with emotionally. My mouth hung open for a few seconds, but I managed to recover and respond. "Well... Not necessarily. This stuff is like getting in an accident. It's bad luck you encountered it in the first place, and it's probably no one's fault."

"Huh? What do you mean? Someone put a curse on my family, right? Because I didn't hand over the teeth."

Oh, that's where the difference in understanding was.

"How should I put this? When it comes to these things, it's not about cause and effect. It wasn't inevitable that you would encounter a telepathic monkey, right, Ichikawa-san? From the beginning, nothing about this was logical. That's why it's the same for the events that followed. Like, take that pot full of teeth. It's the sort of thing that would make you think you're cursed for sure, but you're just caught up in a single chain of events, and I don't think there's any

point in thinking about the meaning behind any single part of the process.”

“That’s why it’s an ‘accident’?” Natsumi asked.

“Yeah, that’s right. It might be closer to an illness, or a disaster, actually. If you look for the cause of an accident, an illness, or a disaster... they exist, sure. But there’s no reason to the ‘why did this have to happen to me?’ part. So you don’t need to think you messed up.”

“I kinda get it... but I don’t want to get Akari involved in that accident. I do want help, of course, but...”

“Yeah...”

All I can do is look, I may not be able to save you... is what I wanted to say, but I stopped short of doing so.

A certain calculating idea came into my head. “Well... I’ll try to help, but can I expect a reward?” I asked.

“How much are we talking?”

“Not money... Would you be able to customize a vehicle for us?”

Natsumi blinked, as if caught by surprise.

“Customize it? Sure, it’s possible...”

“Is it okay if it’s a farm work vehicle?”

The confusion on Natsumi’s face only grew. When I was about to explain the AP-1, I realized Toriko and Akari were staring in our direction.

“Huh? What?” I asked, standing there.

“Sorawo, behind you!” Toriko shouted.

6

Natsumi and I turned in unison. I was looking at the tree with one branch cut off; there was a figure wearing a kimono standing at the foot of it.

It was an old lady in an elegant kimono, but the way she was half bent over was unnatural.

When had she appeared? I hadn't noticed at all.

"Who're you?" Natsumi asked, and the old woman responded.

"I am Sannukikano."

Toriko and Akari ran over, gathering the four of us in one corner of the yard. The old woman who called herself Sannukikano was smiling.

"What're you here for?" Natsumi said intimidatingly.

"Because I did not receive them."

"Huh?"

"I did not receive the teeth, so I cannot give them to you."

"What're you going on about?"

"Now, I must take them with me, it seems."

The moment the old woman said that, Natsumi let out a congested groan, and bent over.

"Ichikawa-san?"

Natsumi covered her mouth with her hands. I saw red strings dripping through the gaps in her fingers. Blood fell to the ground, and something white fell there.

It was a tooth.

"Whuh... What is this?!" Natsumi screamed, blood erupting from her mouth.

"That is one," the old woman said, still smiling.

"Nattsun!" Akari ran up and took on a karate stance. "What're you doing to Nattsun, you hag?!"

That shout, louder than I expected from her small body, made me cower for a moment. But the old woman was unfazed.

"I am Sannukikano."

There was no emotion as she repeated the same line from before. No doubt about it, this was a "phenomenon" from the other world.

“Akari, no.” Natsumi tried to stop her, still covering her mouth, but Akari didn’t turn around.

“You stay back, Nattsun,” she said.

Standing next to me, Toriko had her hand in her tote bag. Our eyes met. She was telling me she could draw her gun at any time, but I gave a short shake of my head. *No, Toriko. We don’t know the situation yet.*

I focused on my right eye in order to pull back the veil of reality—to see Sannukikano’s true form.

The old woman blurred, and something entirely different appeared.

There were five dead monkey mummies intertwined at the core of the thing, and countless human teeth whirling around it like a swarm of mosquitoes. That grotesque form that was not even remotely human made me back away in spite of myself. The mummies’ mouths moved, and a human voice sounded from those pure black cavities.

“Karateka-san, may I take them?” Sannukikano, stripped of its old woman form, asked Akari. A moment later, I realized—*That thing just used the nickname I made up for Akari!*

But Akari wasn’t distracted by that. “Shut up. You aren’t getting a thing,” she muttered angrily, gradually closing the distance. However, she wasn’t attacking; I could see she was hesitating to throw a punch. That was to be expected, of course. In her eyes, she was facing a little old lady.

The teeth whirling around Sannukikano changed the way they were moving, as though they were taking aim. The whorl approached Akari, and she cried out.

“...Ow.”

There was another white tooth in the blood that Akari spat out.

“Two,” Sannukikano counted.

“Sorawo, can I?” Toriko asked impatiently, and I shouted despite myself.

“No! Stay back, Toriko!”

“Huh? Just hold on...”

“Absolutely not! Just listen to me! Stay!”

““Stay?””

“Okay?!”

“O-Okay...”

Though she looked at me with confusion, Toriko must have been surprised by my intensity, because she backed down.

It was true that guns might work, but we just couldn’t use them. It would be beyond bad to open fire in a residential area like this. Besides... if she opened fire, the enemy would target her. No way was I going to let that thing touch Toriko’s teeth!

“Akari! That thing isn’t human! You can clobber it!” I shouted.

“I-It’s not, Senpai?!”

“It’s fine! Go to town on it! You tried to kick a ninja cat, didn’t you? It’s the same! If you can kick a cat, you can kick a weird old woman, too!”

“You’re making me sound too awful, Senpai! That one came at me with a blade, so I had to protect myself, and... wait, what does this one have?! What’d it do to me?! And Nattsun, too!”

“It pulled out your tooth incredibly fast. Hurry, or it’ll get you again.”

“Seriously? But...”

Even after I told her all that, Akari was still hesitating.

Fine then. This is an emergency... Sorry, but I’ll be using that karate of yours.

“Okay, Akari. Listen to me. I’ll be looking at you.”

“Senpai?”

“Because I’m looking, you are strong. Your karate will work on any monster.”

I focused my right eye not just on Sannukikano, but on Akari, too.

“Go get it, Karateka.”

For an instant, Akari stopped, then let out a chuckle. Up until then, there had been no openings in her stance, but suddenly she relaxed. She moved her head

left, then right, cracking her neck.

“Ngh. Heheh. Yeah, that’s right. I’m tough. Heheh.”

“Akari...?” Natsumi called out to her, sounding suspicious.

“Sorry, Nattsun. I took too long. So it pulled out your tooth. Heheh. Mine, too. Heheheh.”

“Akari, what’s wrong?”

“Nothing is wrong. I’m just pissed. You hurt Nattsun. Don’t screw with us, you old hag. You’re gonna need dentures when I’m done with you,” Akari said in a threatening voice, then kicked off from the ground. She landed a flying kick more beautiful than anything I’d ever seen right on Sannukikano. Her opponent was staggered, and Akari landed on the ground, then hit it with a combo of three thrusting kicks.

With fists, elbows, fingers, legs, and headbutts, she unleashed a combination of attacks that went faster than my eyes could follow. Each time she struck, there was a dull echo, and chunks of monkey mummy and teeth would go flying like black and white blood.

I had no knowledge of martial arts or combat sports, so I couldn’t have told you what was happening, but Natsumi and Toriko’s intermittent cries of, “Whoa,” “Whaa,” “Eek,” and, “Ohh,” allowed me to infer that something pretty nasty was going on. Come to think of it, Sannukikano looked human to everyone but me.

I’d done this for just a moment with the ninja cats. If I looked closely at someone with my right eye, it made them go a little crazy. When there was no other option, having an insane karate monster on our side was more reliable than anything.

As long as she was on our side.

The way Akari was now, she had simply lost her mind, not been given some ability to touch beings from the other world. If I had my right eye on the enemy, physical attacks would still work. It didn’t matter whether those attacks were made with bullets, or fists.

“Uh, Sorawo, don’t you think that’s enough...?”

Toriko gave me a hesitant tap on the shoulder. I looked over, and Akari was standing on top of the fallen Sannukikano, unleashing an incredible flurry of punches on the thing. In my right eye, I saw the teeth had been scattered all over, and the monkey mummies had been torn limb from limb.

Diverting my focus away from my right eye, I called out to Akari. “Akari! That’s enough!”

She came to a sudden stop. At the same time, the wind blew past, blowing away the remains on the ground. I covered my face with my hands reflexively. When the wind passed and I opened my eyes, there was nothing left.

“Huh...? She’s gone?” Natsumi mumbled, dumbfounded.

Focusing away from my right eye, I looked around the area. The sense that the area was in a state of decay weakened, and the air around us seemed to change.

It might have been that, without us noticing it, we had been brought into that dangerous interstitial area.

Then Akari came running towards me, sparkles in her eyes. “Senpaaai! I did it! I really did it!”

The way she came at me, out of breath, was almost like a big dog. There was blood dripping from the corners of her mouth. She hugged me without killing her momentum at all, so I nearly got bowled over.

“Gweh.”

“I was able to beat the monster! It’s because you were looking, Senpai!”

“Y-Yeah, uh, good work,” I replied as she gave me a bear hug and swung me around.

“Hahhh, I just don’t know how to describe it, but it felt super good! Like something inside me that had been holding me back was blown away.”

“O-Oh, yeah? Good for you.”

“Yessss. Oh, and... When you look at me, Senpai, it makes my heart race. I

wonder what this feeling is...”

“That? Y-You’re misunderstanding it, okay?”

“A-Akarii...” Natsumi called her name, sounding like she was about to cry. She had blood dripping from the corners of her mouth, too. Akari quickly let go of me and gave Natsumi an energetic hug.

“Nattsun! Sorry, sorry! Were you watching? Hey, was I tough, or what?”

“Y-Yeah, you were super cool. You scared me a bit, though.”

“Heheh, I’ll bet!”

Akari hugged Natsumi—who was taller than her—tightly, and swung her around.

“You’re the strongest, Akari. You don’t even need me anymore, huh?”

“What’re you talking about?”

“I mean, I can’t do anything for you now. Kamikoshi-senpai is way better...”

“Nattsun, Nattsun—that’s not true at all, okay? Don’t cry.”

“I’m not crying, okay?! It’s just, you keep on saying, ‘Senpai, Senpai.’”

“There, there. Everything’s all right now, okay?”

Rubbing her back and head as she hugged her, Akari comforted Natsumi.

“Natsumi-chan and Akari-chan get along really, really well, huh?” Toriko whispered in my ear.

“Looks like it. She was calling her cute earlier, too.”

Toriko stared at me as I made that unconcerned reply. “Sorawo, you did something with your right eye, didn’t you?”

“Well, yeah.”

“Don’t use it on Akari too much. I feel bad for her.”

“I know.”

“Do you really? Look at me, Sorawo.”

Toriko seemed kind of upset, and if I left her like this, I had a feeling like she

might start lecturing me. Looking at the other two, who were ignoring us and enjoying an intimate moment, I decided to change the topic.

“Toriko, you call me cute pretty often, like Natsumi-chan does to Akari, don’t you?”

Toriko looked back at me in silence, blinking intensely. That shook her more than I expected. “...Maybe I do.”

“What part of me are you looking at that makes you think that?”

“Huh...? Your eyes... and your mouth... and your hair, maybe...?”

“Hmm.”

That’s not enough to go on to figure out what she likes, huh?

Having finally calmed down, Natsumi and Akari came over.

“You think this ‘accident’ is over now, Senpai?” Natsumi asked.

“Yeah, probably. Based on past experience, once you take one of those things out, it neutralizes the aberration.”

“Is it okay if we just leave the urn and the other stuff alone?”

“I think you can gather the stuff up, and burn it, or put it out with the trash,” I replied, and Natsumi breathed a big sigh of relief.

“Thank you... I appreciate it.”

“Thank you!” Akari cried out.

I was pretty sure I had only done what I usually did with Toriko, but this was kind of like we were in an athletics club, and it felt weird.

“Oh, right! You two, you should pick up your own teeth,” Toriko said, as if she had just remembered. “If you put them in milk, and go to the dentist right away, they might be able to put them back in for you.”

“For real?!” Natsumi gasped.

“Whoa, we’d better hurry.”

The two of them quickly turned around and picked up the shining white teeth in the middle of the blood on the ground. I joined them as they went in through

the side entrance, and got some milk ready. “So, about what happened here... Do you have any idea what might have triggered it?” I asked.

“Triggered it?” Natsumi echoed.

“In Akari-chan’s case, it was accepting a weird amulet. Have you received anything from anyone, Ichikawa-san?”

“Not really... Oh, but maybe that had something to do with it.”

“What?”

“Just a little while back, I was watching scary videos. From a YouTuber.”

“Online, you mean?”

“Yeah. The stories themselves weren’t that scary, so I don’t remember them, but... they talked about it there. There are kinds of stories that infect you if you know them. The ‘self-responsibility’ type.”

Infectious aberrations. It was a common story topic, but...

“I didn’t really believe in them, but now that I think back, the day after I heard about them, the monkey showed up.”

“Hmm? Who told the story?” I asked.

“It was a woman, and her name was... Luna-sama, I think?”

“Hmm. Luna-sama, huh?”

“Yup. Oh, I remember now. Lunaurumi.”

Luna... Moon, huh? Urumi... Opaque...

“...?!”

An instant later, Toriko and I both stared speechlessly at Natsumi.

“Huh...? What?”

“Satsuki Uruma?!”

“Was she tall? Long-haired? With a nasty look in her eyes? Did she wear glasses? Was it an adult woman?” Toriko was speaking at a mile a minute.

“Nah, she wasn’t like that. More of a kid, if anything. Looked like a high-

schooler, maybe? She was wearing a sailor suit.”

“A sailor suit...”

I looked at Toriko—she was vigorously shaking her head. Satsuki Uruma was apparently not the type to wear a sailor suit despite her age.

“I don’t remember anything about what kind of story it was, though,” Natsumi said, not noticing the air of tension between us.

7

Three days later, we were gathered in the reception room at Kozakura’s house, partially to report our findings. There was me, Toriko, and Akari. To show her thanks, Akari had brought dorayaki, as well as some decent Japanese tea as a gift. I guess it wasn’t just my imagination that the tea from last time tasted bad.

“When I heard the story and looked into it myself, it seems there really are traces of a video uploader like that existing,” Kozakura said, tapping away at her laptop keyboard.

“Traces?” I asked.

“There were two videos on YouTube and one on Niconico Douga that were uploaded with the name ‘Luna-sama’s Binaural Horror Stories,’ but they were reposts from elsewhere, and they’ve all been taken down. No account named ‘Lunaurumi’ exists. But there were a handful of references to the name on Twitter. Things like ‘Luna-sama’s video was crazy scary.’ I figure she’s the type of uploader that’s quietly popular on a closed service.”

“Then do you think what Nattsun saw was one of the reposts?” Akari asked.

“Most likely. Sorawo-chan, do you know what ‘self-responsibility’ type stories are?”

“Yes,” I replied to Kozakura. “It’s a name for a series of weakly-interlinked net lore stories that say that anyone who reads them will be visited by strange things. The name comes from the fact that anyone who reads them is expected to take responsibility for anything that happens to them as a result.”

“I see. It seems the repost video that was taken down was one of those ‘self-responsibility’ type stories.”

“*Sannukikano* is sometimes categorized as a ‘self-responsibility type’ story, but... Huh? Hold on.”

I looked up, and my eyes met with Kozakura’s serious stare.

“Sorawo-chan—is it possible she’s doing this intentionally?”

“I thought that, too.”

“What do you mean? Don’t just come to a conclusion on your own, you two,” Toriko, who couldn’t keep up with what Kozakura and I were talking about, said sulkily.

“Basically... we were speculating that someone who knows about the other world might be deliberately spreading infectious aberrations,” Kozakura explained.

“This Luna-sama person, you mean? What for?” Toriko asked.

“I wonder. Is it for the fun of it?”

“That, or... to bring people into contact with the other world?” I added onto Kozakura’s guess.

“Why would they want them to make contact?”

I shook my head. Piling speculation on speculation wouldn’t help.

“I’ll look into this a bit, too. I read through all the self-responsibility type net lore stories years ago, but I was never involved in any bizarre phenomena as a result. It should be totally...”

I trailed off, seeing that Kozakura and Toriko were giving me the most dubious looks in the history of everything.

“What?”

“No, not ‘what.’”

“Sorawo, do you understand what you’re saying?”

“Huh? What...? Yes, I understand...” Their harsh stares were unrelenting,

and I mumbled until I trailed off.

What?

“Still, I’ve got to hand it to you, Senpai... You sure know your urban legends, huh?”

Akari’s off-base compliment made me feel awkward. “Let me tell you, I have basically no interest in urban legends.”

“Huh?”

It wasn’t just Akari who reacted to my words with surprise. Toriko’s eyes widened with surprise, too.

“You don’t?”

“Yeah. None at all.”

“Uh, then... What are you interested in, Senpai?”

“True ghost stories.”

“How are they different?”

“Huh...? We’re going to have this talk? It’s boring, and I’ll bet you’re not that interested.”

“Please, go on. I want to hear!”

She pressed me on it, so I reluctantly began explaining..

“Okay, I’ll say it... Urban legends are *rumors*, right? They’re like, ‘this happened to a friend of a friend.’ People tell them as if they actually happened, but the origin of the story is unclear. There’s no source.”

“What about true ghost stories?”

“True ghost stories are the *accounts* of people who had direct encounters with the bizarre. There is a clear experiencer and reporter. There may be people who feel differently, but that’s how I define it.”

“And that’s all you’re interested in, huh, Sorawo? Why?”

“Because urban legends are lies,” I said, but Toriko didn’t seem to get it.

“With ‘true ghost stories,’ they could be made up, even if they’re being called

true, though, right?”

“But the source of the information is clear, at least. That on its own is enough to make them different.”

Akari was cocking her head to the side. Toriko was thinking about it. Kozakura had already made the distinction, so she was munching on a dorayaki without much interest.

The difference between urban legends and true ghost stories was a major thing to me, but most people probably didn’t care. Everyone loves urban legends. The idea is exciting to them. But for me, in my middle and high school years, I desperately wanted to run away to someplace else. That’s why I approached ghost stories so seriously.

I wasn’t looking for a rumor that someone may or may not have said, I wanted an account of something someone had experienced, and written down. True ghost stories could be scary, bizarre, incomprehensible... To me, they were all reports on how to get to someplace other than here.

“Which is net lore?” Toriko asked. “Are they urban legends? Or true ghost stories?”

“Net lore means internet folklore, so it only refers to the medium. If they’re told on the net, then both urban legends and true ghost stories can be net lore.”

“Oh, I see! I get it!” Akari clapped her hands. “That’s why you never responded when I talked to you about urban legends!”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“I understand now! I’ll bring you a proper true ghost story next time, then!”

“No thank you.”

“Why not?!”

Did she have to ask? That was exactly what she’d done this time, wasn’t it?

I had a growing suspicion that everything that Akari came to me about was a dangerous thing involving the interstitial space. I couldn’t use my gun carelessly, but there were physical threats, so in some ways it was actually more

threatening than the other world.

I didn't particularly *want* to be in scary situations.

I wanted to go somewhere else, to an unknown world. I wasn't going to let a little terror get in the way of that. That was all.

"Come to think of it, Sorawo-chan, your hair's grown, huh?" Kozakura said as if she'd just noticed.

"It has, yeah. Toriko was saying I should leave it like this, but what do you think, Kozakura-san?"

"I think it's fine. You have pretty silky hair, so I think it would look good long."

That's just what Toriko said, I thought and almost smiled. If both of them said so, they had to be right.

"Okay, I'll try growing it out, then," I said, then realized Akari was staring at me. "What?"

"Oh, no, it just occurred to me—Senpai, if you grew your hair out, you might look kind of like Uruma-sensei."

"...Huh?"

"Your body type, and the feeling you give off is completely different, though. I thought with long hair and glasses, if you stood still and kept quiet, you might look similar at a distance."

"Oh... Oh, yeah?"

Unsure of how to respond to that, I looked around for someone to help, but Toriko and Kozakura were frozen solid on the sofa. They were looking at me as if they had realized something they shouldn't.

Now then—was I going to grow my hair out, or cut it? It seemed that what should have been a minor decision had now become unexpectedly complicated.

File 11: The Whispered Voice Requires Self-Responsibility

1

The next time I spotted Satsuki Uruma, I was leaving the Junkudo bookstore in Ikebukuro.

It was a Saturday afternoon, and Toriko and I had been meeting up on the first floor. We had meetings in Ikebukuro a lot lately. I was at Minami-Yono on the Saikyo Line, while Toriko was at Nishi-Nippori on the Yamanote Line, so when we wanted to go to Kozakura's house at Shakujii-kouen, Ikebukuro was the perfect spot.

We could have each headed for Kozakura's home on our own, but somehow, this just sort of ended up being our habit. I don't even remember which of us suggested it first. It was probably Toriko.

I finished paying at the register, then went to pick up Toriko—she was looking at the display of new releases in literature.

"Sorry for the wait."

"What'd you buy?" she asked.

"Books on camping and survival."

In order to move on to the next stage of exploring the other world, we needed to think of ways to spend the night over there. Though the other world was dangerous at night, needing to return home before dark curbed our range of exploration too much. In order to make longer trips, we needed to figure out how to stay safe at night, and in order to do that, I was going to need to learn survival skills, even if it was only until we figured out something better.

Fortunately, there had just been a camping boom, and that had brought out many books I could reference on the subject. Because we were coming here to meet up already, I picked out a few.

“You don’t need to buy books. I’ll teach you,” Toriko said, sounding displeased. She apparently had experience with camping, gained from lessons from her parents when she was younger. Still...

“You said you’d forgotten what you learned, Toriko.”

“And I’ll remember it all as we go.”

“There you go, just saying things at random again...”

“I’m not saying it at random! My body remembers—it’ll be fine!”

“Sure, sure. You can teach me out in the field.”

I felt people glancing at us as we talked, so I looked at Toriko, and our eyes met.

“What?”

“Oh, no. Nothing.”

“Hmm.”

When I brushed my hair—which had grown to shoulder-length—back over my ear, Toriko looked away awkwardly.

“Maybe I should cut it after all.”

“Huh... Why?”

“Can’t I?”

“There’s no reason you can’t.”

“Well, you and Kozakura-san did both say I’d look good with long hair, after all.”

“It’s not just with long hair, but long hair would look good on you... I think.”

As Toriko tried to avoid making eye contact, I squinted at her. What was it, hmm? Was there something she felt guilty about?

In truth, I knew why Toriko was acting like this. It had all started with one comment from Akari Seto.

According to Karateka, if I grew my hair out, I’d look a little like Satsuki Uruma.

Oh, yeah? I'd thought. She's much taller than me, and has a nasty look in her eyes. Isn't the only resemblance that we both had black hair? Yeah. Satsuki Uruma looks way meaner than me. Don't lump us together.

...Maybe I should have played it off like that, but once she pointed it out, it was unexpectedly important to both Toriko and Kozakura. This was right after they both suggested I grow my hair out, so that only made it several times more awkward—because neither of them was over their feelings for the missing Satsuki Uruma yet.

Incidentally, for our last after-party, which included Karateka, we had pizza at Kozakura's house. Obviously, we couldn't throw out the MVP, who had traded blows—actually, who had landed a one-sided beatdown—on Sannukikano before the party. But, in retrospect, having her eat pizza when her tooth had just been put back in was maybe not the best choice.

Regardless, ever since then, Toriko seemed to feel slightly guilty towards me. Even though I didn't really mind.

Really, I didn't.

I left the bookstore, standing in front of a slightly quiet Toriko. We stood behind a crowd waiting at the crosswalk for the light to change. There was a pedestrian path, left like an island in the middle of a major street with constant traffic. Two crosswalks intersected it, connecting the opposite shores.

When I looked up, I came to a sudden stop.

On the far shore, across the crosswalk, in front of a ramen place that had a long line of foreign tourists in front of it, there was another group like ours, waiting for the light to change.

There she was, again. Among them.

A tall woman in black, with long black hair and glasses—Satsuki Uruma.

"Sorawo? What's up?" Toriko, who was beside me, asked suspiciously, having noticed I was acting strange.

I couldn't respond. Toriko bent her knees a bit and looked at the opposite bank at the same eye level as me.

“Is something there?”

I looked at the profile of Toriko’s face as she said that. There was no sign she had realized something was wrong. In which case, I really was the only one who could see that thing.

Looking back with that thought in mind, Satsuki Uruma stood out from the scenery around her as if she had been cut out of a photograph and then pasted there. Her head was hung, and she was as immobile as a still image—just like when we had encountered her in the other world.

Speak of the devil and he shall appear. There’s a saying that goes like that, but I hadn’t even spoken of her, so it seemed like it should be against the rules for her to show up like this.

The light turned green, and the people around us began to walk. That broke my line of sight, leaving me unable to see Satsuki Uruma for a moment.

When I was able to see the far shore again, the woman in black was nowhere to be found.

“Sorawo.” Toriko put a hand on my shoulder. I took a deep breath, then shook my head.

“...Sorry, I was a little out of it.”

Toriko furrowed her brow and looked closely at me. “You okay?”

“Yeah, I’m good now. It was nothing.”

“Well, okay.” Toriko stroked my arm anxiously, then moved her hand away.

It hardly happened anymore, but on very rare occasions, perhaps because of flashbacks to past trauma, I would lose consciousness. Toriko experienced that, too, so she wouldn’t doubt what I had said.

What I feared had become reality.

After we encountered the Yamanoke, the shadow of Satsuki Uruma that had appeared in the other world suddenly vanished. *This won’t be the end. She’ll come back. Maybe even in the surface world...* That had been my fear, and unfortunately it had been right.

What now? This had turned into a problem.

I couldn't bear the thought of her constantly stalking us. It was good that only I could see her, but it took a lot of focus to keep it from Toriko.

The moment I began walking across the crosswalk, half lost in thought, a car raced past, right in front of my eyes.

"Whoa, Sorawo! That was close! What're you doing?"

"H-Huh? But the light's green...?!"

I looked up in confusion. At some point, the light had turned red. Not only that, we weren't on either of the crosswalks, but the island in the middle of the road.

"...Huh? Why am I here?"

"Hey, are you sure you're okay, Sorawo? You wandered over here on your own, then came to a stop. Don't you remember?" Toriko said, and what was going on finally sank in.

Then... I'd really lost consciousness?

The cars raced past in front of me one after another. If I had taken another step forward without coming to my senses, I'd have been run over by now.

I'd only meant it as a way of distracting Toriko.

The road leading towards the station started getting crowded, and the speed of the cars going by slowed. An advertising truck recruiting for a sex service stopped in front of us. The commercial song, praising the high pay, blared from the truck's speakers. The female characters on the side of the truck had all been blotted out. I was so distracted by it, I didn't notice there was someone else there until they called out to us from behind.

"Um, excuse me. Um..."

I turned in the direction of the shrill voice, and there was a woman in her late forties standing there. She wore a frayed sweater, wrinkled skirt, and sandals on her feet. She also had a black bag that she carried diagonally over her shoulder. Her hair was oily, and the scent of an odd, powerful incense hung in the air around her.

The woman looked to Toriko, then spoke in a tone filled with passion. “Hand! Hand!”

“Huh?”

“The hand. You’re the one, from the photo.”

Toriko and I looked at one another. I had no idea what she was going on about.

“I saw it on a blog, and always thought it was pretty, so I printed it out, and I always keep it with me.”

The woman raised the flap on her shoulder bag, and showed us what was inside. There were a number of paper folders. Each of them had titles like, “THANK YOU,” “SORRY,” “DREAM,” and, “!!!DEVIL!!!” written on them in thick marker. The woman pulled the file that said “THANK YOU,” and pulled out a photograph from inside.

“This, this is it. It is you, yes?!”

The picture she put in front of us was of Toriko.

Toriko was sitting on the train, looking at her phone. Her hand was uncovered, and you could tell it was see-through. The translucence only extended as far as her fingers here. Since she wasn’t wearing a glove on it, this might have been from around the time we encountered Hasshaku-sama.

“What? Why—”

The moment Toriko started to speak, the woman began rambling.

“I’ve been looking for you all this time. You and your shining hand. There aren’t many people as beautiful as you, so I thought it would be easy. The photo was from the Yamanote Line, so I looked around the major stations along the Yamanote Line every day, and I managed to draw you to me. Now, I can finally meet you. My wishes have been given form. Everything is connected.”

I felt a chill in my brain.

I stepped in front of the woman without a word. I talked to Toriko over my shoulder.

“When the light changes, run.”

“Sora—”

“Don’t say my name!”

Toriko closed her mouth just in time. I didn’t want to give any personal information to someone like this.

The woman’s eyes widened as she finally seemed to register my existence. She thrust her closed left fist towards me. It was an odd gesture, with her thumb sticking out between her index and middle fingers.

“You, stop! Don’t look at me!” she rambled, pointing her left hand towards my face.

Before I could do anything, Toriko shouted, “What are you doing?! Stop!”

“The evil eye! This is the evil eye! Ahhh, you can’t turn such a terrifying eye on other people! Don’t look at me!”

Toriko seemed to be mad because she thought the woman was making an offensive hand sign at me, but I understood what she was doing. She was warding against evil. There were legends of “evil eyes” that could curse with a glance all around the world, and tales of using rude gestures to resist them were also widespread. I never expected to be on the receiving end, though...

It was clearly the act of someone ensnared by superstition, but in this particular case, she wasn’t far off the mark. My right eye could, in fact, drive people insane, after all. When I thought about it, I actually thought that was a little funny.

That must have shown on my face, because the woman arched her eyebrows and began screeching.

“What are you laughing about?! You vile brat! You bitch! Satan!”

I thought about saying “that won’t work on meeee” and threatening her, but decided against it. There was nothing to be gained from agitating someone like this.

“Let’s go.”

The light had just changed, so I called out to Toriko and turned around. We walked around the advertising truck, which was still stopped in an inconvenient position, and ran across the crosswalk. As we deliberately dove into the crowd crossing from the other side, the woman behind us was shouting.

“Wait! Please, wait! Just a glimpse! That shining hand—”

We didn’t wait around to let her finish before vanishing into the crowds of Ikebukuro.

2

“Congrats. You got yourself a fan,” Kozakura said teasingly after she heard the story.

“Stop...” Toriko spat the word in distaste. “It’s not funny, even as a joke.”

There was a bigger scowl on her face than I’d ever seen from her before, and I couldn’t help but stare. It was rare to see the usually aloof Toriko show such disgust.

“Right, Sorawo?”

“Huh? Oh! Yeah!”

My mind was wandering, so I ended up giving a half-hearted response. Toriko’s suspicious eyes fell on me, and I looked away.

Once Toriko and I had managed to lose the woman, we came to Kozakura’s house in Shakujii-kouen. Although we were on schedule, we decided to be cautious. We took a roundabout route from the station, so we arrived a little late. Thanks to that, we were having a late lunch, too. The curtains in Kozakura’s room were always shut, though, so it didn’t really make a difference.

“Did you realize photos had been taken of you?” Kozakura asked as she poked away at her keyboard.

“I remember having a photo taken on the train. It was a while back, though. I didn’t like it, so I started wearing gloves... But I think it was just that one time.”

“So that one photo got put up on the net, and you ended up with a passionate

fan, huh?”

“Seriously, I told you to stop!”

“If only she were a cute girl.”

“That’s not the problem!” Toriko raised her voice.

“The way she was forcing her feelings on me was scary on it’s own, but she said awful things to Sorawo, too. I can’t forgive that.”

“Yeah, yeah, I get it. I’m sorry.” Kozakura gave an unemotional apology, taking her hands off the keyboard and leaning back in her chair. “It’s not coming up.”

“What’s not?”

“Your photo.”

There was a single browser window open on Kozakura’s screen. She had apparently been searching the net all this time. The image search results screen was filled with unconscious drunks and passengers wearing strange outfits. It seemed she hadn’t just been idly chatting with us.

“I tried every search keyword that came to mind, but nothing’s coming up. How did that woman find it?”

“I think she said something about a blog,” I suggested.

“A blog, huh? Those can be marked as non-public pretty easily, so it could be hard to chase down...”

“Speaking of that, how’s the other search going?” I asked, and Kozakura frowned.

“Nothing so far. I found traces of the name after that, but I couldn’t find the videos, as usual. You, Sorawo-chan?”

“It’s the same for me. I tried applying different kanji to it, and I got some results that seemed right, but the links were all down, and there was nothing in the cache.”

“I checked YouTube, Nico Nico, and where else was it? I probably found the same things, but they were all gone.”

“The only leads were the fragments of text left in the Google search results,

but they all looked like reposts.”

That’s when Toriko piped in. “Hey. You’re searching for Linaurumi, right?”

“Yeah. That’s right,” Kozakura said.

The ghost story video uploader named Linaurumi. For a while now, Kozakura and I had been trying to dig into that unknown person’s identity. Our first information came from Natsumi Ichikawa, a childhood friend of Karateka—my kouhai, Akari Seto. Just before she began to have problems with Sannukikano, Natsumi had been watching videos from someone calling themselves Linaurumi.

It was my theory that Natsumi had been drawn into the bizarre events as a result of those videos. What she had watched was called a self-responsibility story, which infected those who listened to it, though she said she didn’t remember exactly how the story went.

The self-responsibility stories were a series of ghost stories that said “read this and you’ll be cursed,” and involved young people in ruined buildings or sealed rooms, dying because they were possessed by something. Because they shared many similarities despite the different narrators, it was suspected that there was some connecting factor between them. Some common elements that were given included the names of the being that chased the victims (Yamanin, Yamagishi, Negishi, and so on), damage to the eyes, a portrayal of being pulled by the hair, and visiting a medium for advice only to be met with anger.

I suspected the videos had been made to bring the viewer into contact with entities from the other world. Kozakura was of the same opinion. That meant someone was spreading self-responsibility-type net lore around with the goal of infecting an undetermined number of people.

That was Linaurumi.

We had reason to be confident our guess was right because of her name.

Luna Urumi. “Moon” and “Opaque.” Satsuki had the kanji for moon in it, and Urumi sounded similar to Uruma.

I had even suspected it was her acting under a slightly changed name at first. However, according to Natsumi Ichikawa, Linaurumi was a high school girl

wearing a sailor suit. Neither Kozakura nor Toriko knew anyone like that.

I was looking at this with clearer eyes than them, and my theory was that this was another fangirl that Satsuki Uruma had created during her time as a tutor. They both must have suspected the same, but that they didn't say so showed how strong their lingering feelings for her were.

Whatever the case, I needed to get to the truth behind who this uploader, who was referred to as Luna-sama in the comments, was, and her connection to Satsuki Uruma. Then, whether it was intentional or not, I needed to stop her from getting large numbers of random people involved with the other world. It was beyond dangerous and too much of a nuisance.

That I could skip that preamble and explanation when I was dealing with Kozakura meant that the conversation went fast, and it was easy for us to accidentally end up leaving Toriko out. I thought the sulky look Toriko got on her face when that happened was adorable.

That's why I just gave a curt response, and got on with talking to Kozakura. "So, the original video, the one that got reposted, was apparently making the rounds on a site for smartphones."

"See, that's the thing... If I'm being honest, I don't understand smartphone sites and apps all that well. You're the young ones here, so maybe you have some idea?"

"Nope. Not at all."

"Even though you were in high school just two years ago."

"Only people with a lot of friends use them."

"And you, Toriko?"

"I got into university through a qualification exam. I barely even went to high school."

"What, are there nothing but loners in this room?" Kozakura let out an exasperated sigh. Toriko shook her head.

"We're not anymore."

"Haha. You're making me cry." With a nasal laugh, Kozakura swiveled her

chair back to look at the monitor. “Maybe we should try asking your kouhais again? They’re even younger than the two of you, after all.”

“I’m not keen on the idea, but maybe we should...” I responded grudgingly.

I didn’t want to get Akari and Natsumi any more involved... though, setting Natsumi aside, I was scared that, if left to her own devices, it seemed likely Akari would carry another problem our way.

“There’s no telling when those search results might vanish, too, so better grab a screenshot.”

Kozakura typed “Luna Urumi” into the browser’s search bar, and pressed the enter key.

Then, she froze in place.

“...Huh?”

“What is it?”

Kozakura silently pointed at the screen. Toriko and I looked over her shoulder. The browser showed just one search result.

Runa Urumi’s Whispered Ghost Stories: The Blue-eyed Woman “Hey, do you think this kanji is read Urumi?”

“I... think so, probably.”

“Sorawo-chan, was there one like this before?”

“It’s the first I’ve seen of it.”

“It says ‘The Blue-eyed Woman’...”

Toriko and Kozakura both stared at me, and it felt awkward.

“Uh, well, look, it could be about dolls, you know? Like a French doll...”

“The timing’s a little too perfect for that, don’t you think?”

She was right—the timing was too on point. No matter how much I searched before, I hadn’t found anything, and yet here it was, showing up all of a sudden. It was like we were being watched...

The three middle-aged ladies who had appeared at Kozakura’s house the time

with the Time-space Man crossed my mind.

The information we were seeking was in front of our eyes, but we just stared at the screen, unable to move for a while.

There was almost no information to be gleaned from the search results page—only that the link was to a YouTube page. The time on the thumbnail indicated the video was four minutes and thirty seconds.

“Let’s... try playing it.”

“Huh?”

Kozakura looked up at me, eyes wide.

“Hold on. This is going to be a self-responsibility story, too, isn’t it?”

“I have no doubt it is.”

“You’re going to open it knowing that? Something’s gonna come for sure!”

“Even if something comes, Toriko and I will deal with it. Right, Toriko?”

When I turned to her for confirmation, Toriko grinned. “Yup. We’re pros, after all.”

“No, no, no, no, no.” Kozakura was shaking her head. “This is crazy! What’re you getting so carried away for?!”

“But if we don’t open it, we still won’t know anything.”

“Yeah, but still.”

“I’ll click. Pass me the mouse.”

“I don’t wanna! No, no, no!” Kozakura shouted, and her chair immediately rolled backwards, mowing down a pile of books on the floor, at which point she jumped out of it and bolted out into the hall. I’d never seen her move so fast.

“Kozakura-san?!”

“No way am I watching it! Are you out of your mind?!”

I heard her shouting from the hall, and then a door slammed shut somewhere.

“You’re being cruel to Kozakura, Sorawo.”

“Well, yeah, I am.”

I looked from the door back to Toriko. “I know what I said, but you should get away, too, Toriko.”

“Why? If you’re watching it, I will, too.”

“Thanks. But you remember what happened with the Kotoribako, right?” I said, and Toriko frowned.

That time, the Kotoribako appeared when we carelessly read from Satsuki Uruma’s notes, and Toriko and I nearly died. Satsuki Uruma had appeared with it, but that was a secret only I knew. I had no idea what would happen this time. For that reason, I felt it best to halve the risk.

“With my eye, if there’s something abnormal, I can detect it. So you go be with Kozakura, Toriko.”

“...Okay,” Toriko said reluctantly. “But scream right away if you’re in danger, okay?”

“I know.”

“The video’s four minutes, thirty seconds, so... if you haven’t called me in five minutes, I’ll come running. Okay?”

“Okay.”

Even after I’d replied to her, Toriko kept looking at me with a furrowed brow. I was about to tell her, “It’ll be all right,” when Toriko suddenly moved.

An instant later, I was in her embrace.

“Huh?!” I let out a strange cry and stiffened. The sensation of Toriko’s warmth, her scent, her softness, and her firm muscles all filled my head.

How many seconds did it last? Toriko hugged me for a while, then moved away.

“Be careful, okay?”

“O... Okay. It’s gonna be all right.”

I was still a little shaken up when I responded. Honestly, I had been calmer before she hugged me.

After watching Toriko leave with a worried look still on her face, I closed the door.

Whew... That surprised me. I wish she wouldn't do things like that so suddenly. I don't know how to respond...

I took the Makarov from my bag, pulled the slide, and checked that it was loaded. I crouched next to the desk, gun in one hand, and grabbed the mouse.

Honestly, I was scared, too, but this wasn't a time to hesitate. If I didn't hurry, Toriko would get worried and come back.

I took a deep breath to calm myself, then clicked the link.

The screen changed to YouTube. The view count was in the single digits. The poster's name was "rnurm." Nothing was written in the video description. Holding the Makarov's grip with both hands, I focused on the video.

There were a few moments of darkness, and then a girl in a sailor suit appeared on the screen.

It was a wide shot: from the front, at a slightly upwards angle, showing from her mouth down to about her stomach. The background was a dirty concrete wall, which was exactly the sort of thing you'd expect from a ruin. I focused with my right eye, searching for any hints of strangeness. I wasn't sure about the other side of the screen, but inside this room, around the PC, there was no silver halo appearing.

"Good evening. I'm Runa Urumi."

What?

The moment I heard the voice, a cold, throbbing numbness spread from my ears to my neck and down my back. It felt like something was running down my spine.

"Hello to any new viewers. And to the rest of you, hello again. Hee hee."

It was an amateur voice, not sounding particularly theatrical. It didn't feel like she was a voice actor, or a broadcaster, or a pro with that sort of vocal training. If anything, she was stuttering a bit. But the voice itself was incredibly alluring.

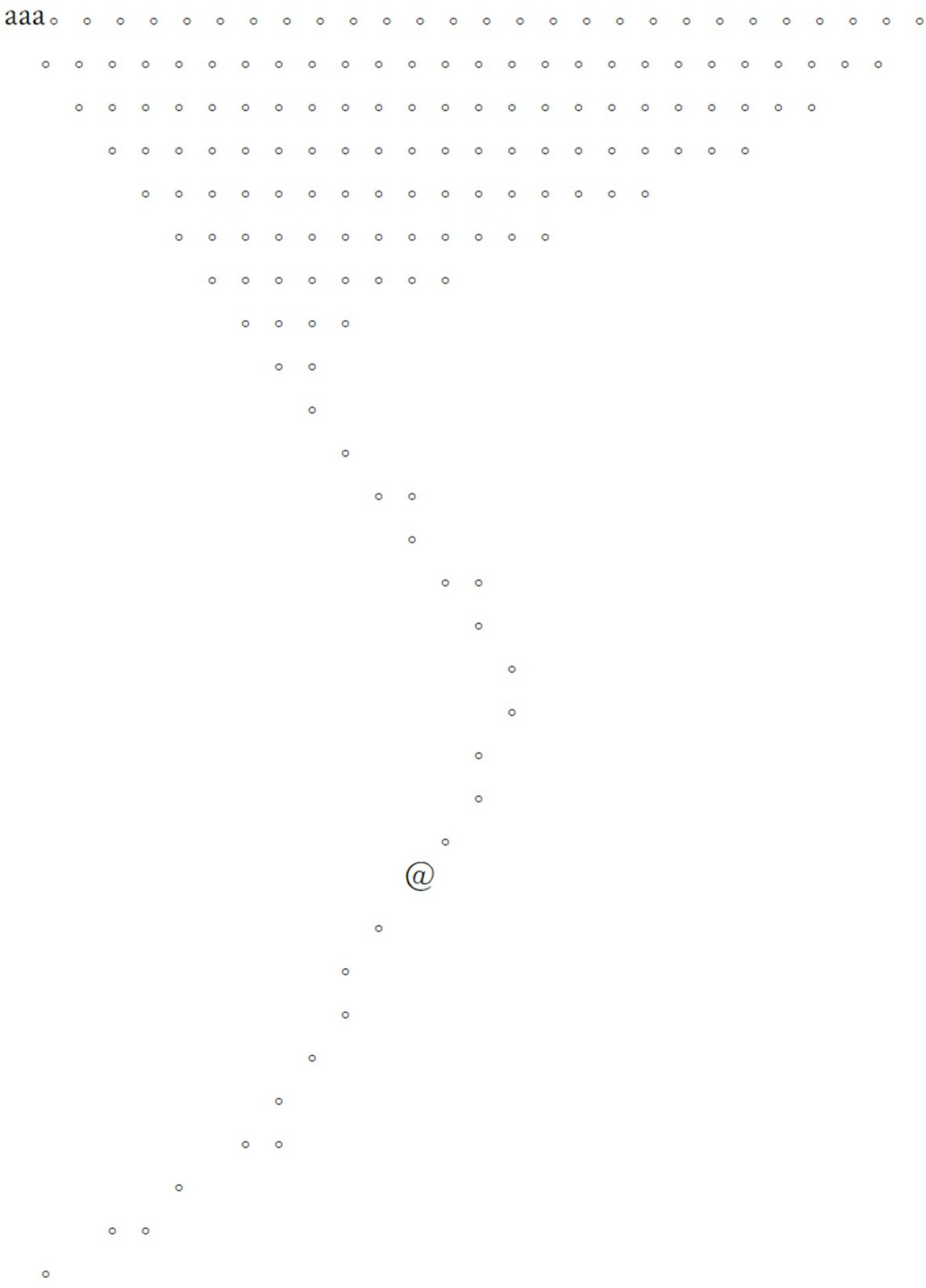
"Please, be careful. For everything past this point, you need to take

responsibility for yourself. When you finish listening, something may happen to you. If you don't want that, stop the video now."

Each time the girl spoke, the throbbing grew. It felt like she was whispering right next to my ear.

It was my first time hearing a voice like this. Something entered through my ear, whorled around inside my head, and my consciousness spun around with it, as if being sucked in...

“Is that okay? Well then, once again, welcome to Runa Urumi’s Whispered Ghost Stories. Today’s story is The Blue, Eyed, Wo, maaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa



“—Sorawo!”

“Whaa?!”

I jumped because there was a shout in my ear.

“Are you okay? What happened?”

Toriko was standing next to me. I shook my head. “...What was I doing? Did I say anything?” I asked.

“You were just standing by the window.” Toriko looked out the window, perplexed.

Outside the window... For some reason unknown to me, I had opened the blinds that were always closed and stood there, staring outside. The Makarov, which should have been in my hands, was laying on top of the desk. I had no memory of placing it there.

There was nothing of particular note outside. Just a mossy wall. The orange of the evening sun was shining into the room.

“How many minutes has it been?”

“Five minutes. How was the video?”

I looked back to the screen when she said that. The YouTube screen showed an exclamation mark inside a circle on a gray field. In other words: “The video could not be found.”

“...Looks like it’s gone,” I mumbled, still feeling dazed.

“In the end, we still know nothing,” Kozakura grumbled. “Honestly, after making a huge fuss at someone else’s house...”

“You were the one making a fuss, Kozakura.”

“Oh, be quiet, you idiot.”

We were on the way back to the station. I thought about what had happened while I listened to Toriko and Kozakura talking behind me.

That poster uploaded the video to the net at the perfect time, and once I’d seen it, she pulled it down, like it had done its job. It was almost like we were

being watched.

Were we really being observed? Or was that another “phenomenon” from the other world? Either way, this wouldn’t end here. If the video was of the self-responsibility type, something would happen to me for watching it.

“Hey, it’s okay if you want to stay the night. It’s already getting late.”

“It’s not that late. It isn’t even 7:00 yet.”

“It’s getting dark out!”

Kozakura kept talking to Toriko in a shrill voice behind me. This was the first time Kozakura had decided to come with us as far as the station when we were going home. Normally, she’d give us a curt “get going” and shoo us off, but it seemed she couldn’t handle her fear today.

“...If you insist, then okay, but do you have bedding ready for us?”

“I don’t, but you can sleep on the couch.”

“We can’t both sleep on the couch.”

“Well, then stay up all night. I won’t be sleeping, either.”

“What do you want to do, Sorawo?” Toriko asked, and I responded without turning around.

“Kozakura-san, are you sure you want that?”

“How so?”

“I think something will be coming to me because I watched the video. If we’re together, you’ll be caught up in it.”

“Guh...”

“Yeah, she’s right. Kozakura, I know you’re scared, but I think you’re better off sleeping alone tonight.”

“I’m sure you two have it easy since you’re together!”

“Well, since we’ve come all the way to the station, do you want to get dinner? Once we get some alcohol in you, I’m sure your mood will—”

I started to talk, but I felt something pull my hair from behind.

“Ow! Hey... Stop that!”

I turned around in indignation, but Kozakura and Toriko just stared blankly at me. They were about three meters behind—not a distance from which they could have pulled my hair.

Huh? I thought, and then a moment later, the figure standing behind the two of them jumped into view.

Satsuki Uruma.

That shadow, which had never twitched before, suddenly moved.

The black-clothed arm rose, and reached for Toriko’s shoulder.

“Toriko!” I screamed and ran towards her. I grabbed her by the shoulder and pulled hard.

“Wah?!”

Toriko fell forward, her hands on the ground.

“Ow! What was that for—”

I was hardly listening to Toriko.

Right now, I was standing so close I could have touched Satsuki Uruma. It reminded me of the time with Hasshaku-sama.

I slowly looked up, and Satsuki Uruma was looking down at me. Her two brilliant blue eyes, far deeper in color than my right eye, were like terrifying holes leading to the depths of the other world. I felt like I was going to fall into them, and I lost my head for a moment.

That’s when it happened. There was the sound of a car braking, and a white van pulled up right next to us. I looked a second later, and two men got out of the sliding door, which was already open, and grabbed me.

“Huh...?! ”

Before I could respond, I was lifted up, and thrown inside the van. I gasped as I struck the floor, which was covered by a rubber sheet. There were two more men inside the vehicle, and they held me down and covered my head with a bag.

Who are these guys?!

The moment I tried to resist, I felt a sharp pain in my neck. As I was thinking, *I've been stabbed with something*, I was struck by an intense drowsiness. The strength slipped right out of me. Forget resisting—I couldn't even keep my eyes open. There was someone lying next to me, and they groaned.

Toriko...!

There was the sound of footsteps, and the body of the vehicle sank. The door slid shut, the engine roared, and the van suddenly accelerated. Someone was outside, shouting. Shouting my name.

Beneath the waves of drowsiness, my consciousness sank into the darkness.

3

Sorawo... Sorawo...

Someone was calling my name.

Come on... Wake up...

Toriko?

Where am I?

Hurry—you have to...

Burn them... Hurry...

“Ah...!”

I suddenly snapped back into consciousness. When I opened my eyes, my vision was obstructed by the bag over my head. The rough fabric allowed just a little light through.

There was a lingering drowsiness, probably from the drugs, which made my head throb. My whole body felt sluggish, and I wanted to lie down as soon as humanly possible. I tried to move, but found that my hands and feet were bound. I was sitting in a chair with my hands tied behind my back.

“Urgh...”

There was a groan from beside me. Had Toriko been caught too? I panicked and was about to call out to her, but I sensed the presence of other people.

“I see you’re awake.”

It was a man’s voice.

Footsteps approached me from behind, and the bag was pulled from my head.

A concrete floor and walls filled my widening field of view. The area I was in was wide and dark with no windows. It felt like the ruins of some sort of manufacturing facility.

There were several men and women surrounding us at a distance, their eyes on us. They wore everything from a suit, to T-shirts and jeans. All unfamiliar faces.

No, wait. I recognized the one.

The suspicious woman who had called out to us in Ikebukuro this afternoon. When our eyes met, she jumped a little and looked away, then hid behind another person.

I turned to the side, wondering if Toriko was all right, and what I saw caught me by surprise.

The one tied to a chair only a few meters away from me wasn’t Toriko, it was Kozakura. Having not yet fully regained her senses, she was scowling and shaking her head.

“Who’re you people...? I don’t remember doing anything that would get me kidnapped,” Kozakura asked in a husky voice. “You don’t look like yakuza. Are you looking for a ransom? Sorry, but my assets are limited, and she’s just a broke student. Did you mistake us for someone else in the neighborhood?”

“There’s been no mistake here, Kozakura-san.”

I shuddered at the voice from behind me.

I knew that voice. That all-too-alluring voice that was soft, sensitive, and seemed to creep inside my head through my ears.

The owner of that voice approached with heavy steps, passing in between Kozakura and me, and then turning to face us from the front. It was a school girl in a cardigan and sailor suit. Her hair was quite long, with braids tied into circles on the sides of her head before they flowed down her back. Her eyes narrowed in satisfaction as she looked at us, sitting there, unable to move. It was my first time seeing her face, but I knew her immediately.

“...Runa Urumi.”



“That’s riiight.”

Runa Urumi clapped for me and then said, “Sorry for scaring you. Are you feeling all right? I did ask them not to use anything too powerful on you, at least. Oh, don’t mind all these people. They’re really useful, though. They’ll do anything I tell them to.”

Giggling, Runa Urumi continued. “Oh, so like I was saying, I have some important business with Kozakura-san.”

“What?”

“I’ve been thinking I’d like you to tell me about Satsuki-sama.”

Kozakura looked up at Runa Urumi’s face, and was quiet for a moment. “That’s why you abducted me? Just to ask that?”

“I mean, if I asked you normally, I’m sure you wouldn’t tell me.”

One of the onlookers brought out another chair. Runa Urumi sat down as if that were the perfectly natural thing to do here, and turned to face us.

“I did my research. You were collaborating with Satsuki-sama to research the Blue World. Until she went missing, you and Toriko Nishina were the ones who were closest to her. Am I right?”

“...”

Kozakura made no attempt to answer. The Blue World must have been their name for the Otherside.

In a voice tinged with exasperation, Kozakura asked, “You’re a Satsuki fan...? You’re in high school, aren’t you? When did you meet her? Just how many underage girls has she laid her hands on?”

“Oh, trying to pull the seniority card? Not cool, Kozakura-san,” Runa said teasingly. “Here’s the thing. I’ve never met Satsuki-sama.”

“Huh?”

“If we’re being exact, I’ve heard of her, but we’ve never spoken.”

Seeing the dubious looks on my and Kozakura’s faces, Runa began proudly telling her story.

“I’ve been a streamer since I was in middle school. It’s just that back then, I didn’t really do PVs, you know? Though, let’s be blunt, I wasn’t popular at all. I tried changing apps, and did all sorts of stuff, but I stayed buried... Just when I was thinking of giving up, there was this time when I was listening to other people’s ASMR videos to use them as a reference. Oh, do you know what ASMR is?”

“Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response,” Kozakura responded instantly, and Runa clapped her hands.

“Niiice! Yeah, that. You probably got it.”

“...What’s that?” I whispered, and Kozakura responded with no humor.

“In broad terms, she’s talking about sound fetish videos. Recordings of sounds like cutting hair, typing, flipping pages, and other things that it feels good to listen to.”

“Yeah, ear cleaning and whispers are popular, but... what I found then was a sound like nothing I’d ever heard before.”

“You got into 18+ stuff?”

“Hey, don’t ask dumb questions like that,” Runa said in no uncertain terms, then got this enraptured look on her face. “It was... the sound of God.”

Kozakura and I looked at each other.

“Even now, I can remember it clearly. The video was titled Blue World. The thumbnail was... a blonde, foreign girl, but that was probably just some license-free photo. I listened, and I couldn’t tell what the sound was at first. It sounded like it might be the boundless sky, and the wind blowing through it. Or perhaps of sinking deep into the sea. It was a mysterious sound, and I wondered what it was as I listened... and then God appeared.”

“What do you mean, God?”

“Something really big, really scary, and completely inhuman... floated up out of the sound.”

“Big, scary, and inhuman...? Isn’t that...” I whispered to myself, and Runa nodded passionately.

“Yes! God, of course! I was completely shocked. I mean, here I was listening to ASMR, and God appeared inside my head. You’d never see that coming, huh?”

Well, no, I don’t suppose I would...

“I got surprised and scared, but for some reason I just couldn’t stop listening. As I did, the words of a woman who could convey the word of God came out. That was—”

“Satsuki?”

“Yes! Satsuki-sama! And in that moment, I understood. I had lived all of this time for her, and from now on, too, I would always live for her. That realization made me drop to my knees then and there. Satsuki-sama touched me inside the sound, and bestowed upon me a gift. That is my Voice. The gift of the Blue World, which will make anyone do as I say. I know exaaaactly what I should use it for, too.”

“...Does that video still exist?”

“You want to hear it now, too? Well, sorry, it’s gone. I mean, once I finished listening to it myself, it was gone before I realized. I couldn’t find it in search, it wasn’t in my local cache, and there was no play data left. I don’t even remember how I came across it in the first place. That’s why I even started to doubt there ever was a video. But I had clear memories of it, and I remembered. To the point I can play it back in my head. I’m sure the video changed its form into the Voice, and entered me. This is what they call a revelation, right?”

What was this story? A sound burned into her memory by a video that it was doubtful existed. An unknown “God.” The sudden appearance of Satsuki Uruma in this disorganized tale. And her gift...

In a low voice, Kozakura asked, “And that’s how you came to worship Satsuki?”

“Worship, yes! I worship Satsuki-sama. The lady who bestowed this Voice on me. The messenger of the Blue World... I already know she exists. I am chasing after her, hoping to meet her just once more.”

“No matter how you slice it, that’s bizarre. You’re crazy, all of you.”

“Not all of us. I’m the only one who worships Satsuki. The rest of them worship me.”

When Runa looked to the people surrounding us, they nodded passionately. Even in the dim light, I could see the redness of their cheeks and the moistness of their eyes.

I could feel an intense furrowing of my brow.

I knew these guys were a cult...

The thought had occurred to me because that Thank You Woman was with them, but I wasn’t happy to be proven right. You can’t reason with cultists. No matter what their object of worship was, of all the types of groups in this world, they were the ones I least wanted to be involved with. Honestly, when it came to cultists, I’d be happier dealing with monsters from the other world.

Maybe she felt my eyes on her, because Runa Urumi spun around to face me.

“Oh, right—one other thing I wanted you to tell me. Who are you?”

“You kidnapped me without knowing?”

“Honestly, they were supposed to bring me Kozakura-san and Nishina-san. But, surprise, they brought me some girl I don’t know.”

“I’m terribly sorry!”

There was a loud voice from behind us. I twisted my neck to look back there, and there were four men on their hands and knees groveling behind us. The men who had kidnapped me and Kozakura, I suppose.

“Forgive us, please, Luna-sama!”

“Let us try again! I swear we will not disappoint you this time!”

The men were shouting, but Runa gave a disinterested sigh. “Well, what’s done is done. So...? Who were you again? What do you have to do with Satsuki-sama?”

“That’s my student. No connection to Satsuki,” Kozakura answered before I could.

“Student? Even though you’re not a professor?”

“She’s a weirdo who comes all the way to my house just to learn from me.”

“She has some dangerous toys for a simple weirdo, though?”

One of the cultists brought my tote bag to Runa. She peered inside, and pulled out the Makarov, still in its holster.

“You’ve been to the Blue World, too, I see. I’m right, aren’t I?”

When I didn’t answer, Runa took her hand off the Makarov.

“I mean, it’s that eye.”

Runa rose from her chair, walked in front of me, and looked closely at my face.

“This isn’t an implant, or a color contact. Wooooow, just what did you have to look at to end up with an eye like that?”

“Luna-sama! It’s dangerous. That woman has the evil eye,” the Thank You Woman shouted from behind us.

“Evil eye?”

“The demonic eye that brings calamity. You mustn’t let her look at you. It will harm your body.”

“Hmm. Is that a fact?”

That question was directed at me, though I didn’t know how to answer it.

“...I dunno.”

“Hmm. If it’s that scary, maybe we ought to pluck it out.”

The moment Runa said that, one of the men standing behind us pulled out a knife and stepped forward. I tried to flee in terror, but my hands and feet wouldn’t move an inch. I was bound to the chair using the sort of plastic zip ties that were generally used to hold cables together.

No way. They couldn’t carve out someone’s eye that easily... As I stared at the dull gleam of the knife, unable to believe the situation I was in, Runa let out a cheery laugh.

“Hee hee, I was joking! Just joking! You can stand down now.”

At Runa’s instruction, the man obediently returned to his former position. I was terrified as Runa looked down at me and smiled.

“They’re all so docile. They love my voice, and they’ll do anything I order them to. Even if I don’t tell them clearly what to do, they can read what I might want, and are one step ahead of me. If I hadn’t stopped him, you wouldn’t have that eye now.”

Runa reached out and stroked my cheek.

“But that would be a shame, wouldn’t it? It’s such a pretty eye... Is this a gift from the Blue World, too?”

Unable to utter a word in response, I just took shallow breaths and stared at Runa’s face.

“Hey. She’s not involved. If you have something you want to ask, ask me,” Kozakura interjected. Runa took her hand off me, and walked over to Kozakura.

“That’s true. I was originally planning to interview you, after all.” Runa walked around behind Kozakura, and whispered in her ear. “Now, to start off... Will you tell me the girl with one blue eye’s name?”

“Eek...!” Kozakura let out a shrill cry and ducked her head. She was supposed to be whispering, but I had been able to hear her, too, even at this distance.

Her voice before was alluring enough, but this was on a whole other level. There was clearly some kind of mode shift happening. It was bad enough hearing it nearby, but who knows what would happen to me if she whispered right in my ear.

Kozakura twitched and stiffened in her chair. Her eyes widened, and goosebumps rose on her neck.

“Ah... Ah...”

“Hey. Tell me. What’s her name?”

“Ka... mikoshi... Sora... wo...”

“And how do you write that?”

“The ‘kami’... is paper, and the ‘koshi’... is the ‘etsu’... of Joetsu...” Kozakura submitted to the voice and spilled the information. Suddenly, I noticed the believers’ eyes were fixated on Kozakura as she was interrogated. They all looked incredibly jealous, with flushed faces. It was super gross—the worst kind of scene.

“You’re Kamikoshi-san, huh? Nice to meet you.”

When Runa stood upright, Kozakura slumped like a marionette with her strings cut.

“Would you mind waiting just a moment? I’ll have your other friend, Nishina-san, brought along in no—”

“Don’t you touch Toriko!” I shouted despite myself. Kozakura and Runa both looked at me in surprise.

“Hmm. Oh, I see. You’re Nishina-san’s partner then, huh?”

Nodding in satisfaction at her own explanation, Runa moved away from Kozakura and approached me.

She wrapped her arms around me from behind the chair, and brought her lips to my ears. Then, she spoke in a low whisper.

“I’m sure you can tell me some interesting things, too—”

“Eek!”

I froze with fear.

It reminded me of seeing a picture of hell as a child, and being terrified by a punishment where molten metal was poured into every hole of the person’s body. That was what Runa Urumi’s voice made me remember. It felt like cold, liquid metal was being poured in my ear. This was nothing like the “whispered ghost story” I had heard through the speakers while watching her on the other side of a monitor. It was a voice with weight, pressure, and a numbing electric sensation.

If I kept listening to this voice, it would ruin me. I’d go completely mad. Even though I was certain of that, all I could do was listen.

Runa whispered.

“I’ll do you later, okay? For now, sit still.”

“St... op...”

“Shh... Quiet. Good night, Sorawo Kamikoshi-san.”

The liquid metal voice filled my brain, and flowed down my spine. It pushed into my mind, and I was helpless to stop it.

4

I was thrown down on a mattress, and my eyes snapped open.

As I quickly tried to sit up, I watched the door close with a loud noise, right before my eyes. It was a rusty metal door. It was locked from the outside, and I realized I had been locked in.

My head felt awfully heavy. I felt like if I relaxed, that voice would come back to me. The spine-tingling sensation of Runa’s voice...

I stood up on shaky legs and surveyed my prison. There was a window much too high for me to reach and a flickering fluorescent light. There was an air vent at about the same height, but even if I had been able to climb that high, there was a metal lid on it, so it wouldn’t do me any good.

The door had a covered peephole at about eye-level. If I poked my finger into it, I could see out from inside, too. I pressed my face to the door and looked out, but the cultist who had thrown me in here was nowhere to be seen. The footsteps got more distant, and soon, I could no longer hear them at all. I could only see a very small area: the hall five meters to the left and right, and the metal door on the wall across from this one. It was probably another confinement room like this one. I removed my finger, and the lid lowered, closing the peephole.

The only things in the room were a beat-up mattress and a worn blanket. There was a Western-style toilet in one corner of the room. It had running water, at least. It reminded me of the “New York-style” room we had stayed in down in Okinawa. I had thought it was like a jail cell then, but I’d never expected to get chucked into a place like this myself...

I took a deep breath.

As I closed my eyes and stayed put, the sensations I had felt during that time came back to me.

That time back during high school when I was being chased around by the cult my father and grandmother joined.

The anger, irritation, and the painful determination not to let things go anyone else's way.

I detected a hot, dry smell—like the kind made when you used a frying pan without water or oil—deep in my nose.

With each careful breath, many things fell away from my thoughts.

Uncertainty, worry, confusion.

What would I do when I got out of here? Should I go to the police? What was happening to Kozakura? Was Toriko still all right...?

I chased all these things from my head. I focused my mind on the highest priority: How was I going to get out of here and survive?

I hadn't felt this sensation in a while—I'd rather never have tasted it again. I worried I had gotten completely rusty, too.

But you were waiting inside me, all this time, huh?

Welcome home, me.

I'm home, me.

I felt like the anti-cult mode me that I had built up over my middle and high school years was welcoming me back. But when I was in this mode, I thought of almost nothing but what was essential. That inclination had let me escape countless times.

The time I escaped out the bathroom window with my mind in a hazy state after my grandmother drugged me, the time I shut myself in the shed on the roof of a cultist-owned building, the time I slid down a rain pipe from the fifth floor of a building, the time I was chased by guys with dogs out in the mountains... She had saved me a good number of times before all the cultists

died and I was set free. The me of this mode was reliable.

...If I thought about it, I had to wonder why—with all the times Toriko and I had been in danger in the other world—I hadn't entered this mode once there. It was strange that she hadn't shown her face once, despite the threat to my life...

I slapped my cheeks with both hands.

That was enough reminiscing. It was time to switch over.

The fundamental method for dealing with a situation of confinement was to build a trusting relationship with the people imprisoning you. To greet them, talk about your family and yourself, and to thank them when they brought you food. To never show fear, and give the impression that you are an equal human being in everything you do.

However, that method assumed long-term confinement. I couldn't use it here. I was facing Runa Urumi. Her encounter of the fourth kind had given her a seductive voice that completely took control of her followers. Any time that passed put me at a greater disadvantage. I needed to escape as soon as possible.

Besides, I had no intent of seeing my enemies as human.

I searched the cell once more. Blanket, mattress, toilet. I went to work, looking for anything that could be of use.

The dingy mattress was coming apart at the seams. I shoved the fingers of both my hands inside, and tore. I ripped off the outside, and exposed the insides of it. Springs were peeking out through the flattened cotton.

I pulled out a number of them, and checked how firm they were. The parts from near the center of the mattress were pretty worn, and I could twist them even with my bare hands.

I checked the toilet. The seat was rickety, and I could probably tear it off, but it was plastic and didn't seem likely to be of much use. It was dirty, too. I tried to take the lid off the tank, but it was caulked shut, and I couldn't.

What about the handle on the side of the tank for flushing? When I grabbed it

and gave it a rattle, the base of it was pretty loose. This might work.

I grabbed it with the blanket, put my feet against the tank, and used my weight to pull as hard as I could.

The handle broke off at the base, and I landed flat on my back.

Ow...

Regardless, I still had the handle in my hands, and this toilet would never flush again. I reflected that I should have probably used it first, but it was too late for that now.

I pressed a spring against the handle, and wrapped the metal wire around it as I stretched it out.

The wire was curled, so it was hard work. The edge of the toilet tank served as a jig, too. Even with that, by the time I had wrapped four of them around it, my hands hurt pretty bad. Regardless, I had a jumble of metal with considerable weight to it now.

It wasn't a weapon. Even if I hit someone in the face with it, with my strength, it wasn't going to be more than a distraction. This tool served another purpose.

I stretched out another spring to create a wire. Then I opened the peephole on the door again, and used the wire to keep it propped open.

I listened closely, but I heard nothing.

Okay. I was ready to go.

I put the blanket over my head, and looked up to the ceiling.

I threw the hunk of metal at the weak shine of the fluorescent light.

The first time it missed, hit the wall, and fell back down.

It was hard to throw straight up. I got as close to the wall as I could, and made another attempt.

It hit the ceiling, it bounced off the walls, it came down on my head.

I tried and tried again. When I eventually hit the light, it just bounced off and came back down.

While I was doing this, my neck and shoulders started to hurt. I stopped to massage them a bit, then got back to it.

Again and again.

Right around the time I got to thinking that maybe I should make a sling from the edge of the mattress, I hit it for the fifth time, and perhaps due to the accumulated damage, there was a small explosion as the glass finally shattered.

I hurriedly turned my face downward, and fine pieces of glass rained down on the blanket over my head. When I opened my eyes, the room was pitch dark.

There was a single sliver of light shining in from the peephole on the door. Outside of that, it was all darkness. I brushed off the shards of glass and sat by the wall. After all that work, my right arm was clearly at its limit.

I sat in the darkness with a blanket over me, and waited.

I thought I could get them to open the door. I had no solid plan for what happened after that.

I wish I had a gun. Saying that's not going to help, though.

I'm counting on you, me.

Well, I'll give it a go, me.

I'd survived on spur-of-the-moment decisions up until now. Surely, it would work out this time, too. I wouldn't consider any other possibility. It was pointless to.

Still, as I sat there alone, the thoughts I had set aside started to cross my mind.

For instance, yeah... The doubt I'd had before.

Why had I never entered this mode while exploring the other world? I ended up wracking my brains every time, and my life was definitely on the line, but it was clearly different from my anti-cult mode.

The one thing that might have been a little close was the time with the Time-space Man, when I was chasing after Toriko when she went missing. The reason I hadn't been confused when I encountered a doppelganger in the glitch was

because I had this sort of experience. No, well, that doppelganger might be a separate entity from this mode of me, though.

What was the difference...?

I heard footsteps outside the door, and stood up.

They're here.

I lay in wait as the footsteps drew nearer, then stopped in front of the door. I saw two men through the peephole, as well as Kozakura's head as she was being held up by them.

"Hm?" One of the men let out a suspicious grunt.

"What's up?"

"Hey, why is this open?"

He brought his face close to the window, and it blocked out the light from the corridor. The room got even darker. He shouldn't have been able to see much of anything. Maybe just my right eye reflecting the light a bit.

I focused my consciousness on my right eye, and looked directly at the man peering into the room.

The man stopped and seemed to look back at me. The light was behind him, leaving his face shadowed. What kind of expression was he making? It didn't matter. I continued to look at him, eye unswerving.

That's when I realized something strange. The man had a silver halo around his head. That phosphorescence stuck out from both of his ears, writhing like slugs.

Could it be that I was seeing Runa Urumi's power of control?

With his head wrapped in light, the man silently used a key to open the door.

"Hey, put this one in her room first—"

The man's hands stopped, and no sooner had he turned back to the other man who had raised his voice than I heard a dull thud.

There was a groan of shock and pain, then the sound of something being slammed into the door across the hall, which made an incredible echo.

The one who'd been taken out slumped to the ground. I thought I heard ragged breathing for a while, then the original man came back to this door. He grumbled as he turned the key, and opened it. Past the man blocking the doorway, I saw another man leaning against the door across the hall, unconscious.

"What the hell...? Why'd I go and do that...?"

The man stumbled into the room.

"It's your fault, huh? It's gotta be you..."

The way this was going, he'd beat me to death. I needed to create an opening... As I kept looking, without averting my eye, the slug-like phosphorescence in his head began to wriggle around.

"Urrrgh..."

The man groaned and majorly stumbled. He collapsed to the floor, catching himself with both hands.

Now.

I threw the blanket that had been on my head at him as a distraction, and charged toward the door. The man shouted something as he tried to seize me, but I narrowly dodged him and got out into the hall. Putting both hands on the door which opened outwards, I slammed it with all my strength. Noticing there was a door bolt, I slammed it in.

There was a voice that seemed to be weeping—or convulsing with laughter—inside the room.

I helped Kozakura, who was lying on the ground beside me, to her feet. She was so light that it surprised me.

"Are you okay, Kozakura-san?"

"Sorawo-chan... What about you...?"

"I'm fine. Can you stand?"

"I dunno. Let me hold onto you."

Kozakura stood on unsteady legs and tried to catch her breath.

“What’d you do to these guys, Sorawo-chan?”

“Used my right eye, drove them crazy,” I replied. Kozakura looked at me like she couldn’t believe it.

“Sorawo-chan...”

“Yes?”

“You’re not normal, are you?”

“I’m focused.”

“Oh, okay then...” Kozakura looked at me dubiously.

“We’re going. Let’s hurry up and get out of here. If you’re having trouble walking, please, hold onto me.”

“O-Okay.” Kozakura clung to my arm. She looked really frazzled. She shook her head over and over, maybe trying to chase away the haziness.

“Are you okay? That voice sure is crazy, huh?”

“Yeah... Sorry, I probably blabbed a whole lot of stuff to Luna-sama. About you, Sorawo-chan.”

“Luna-sama?”

When I repeated that, Kozakura’s eyes widened and she stopped talking.

“This is seriously bad... If I go nuts, you escape without me, Sorawo-chan.”

“Will do.”

I gave her a frank nod, and Kozakura sighed.

“Sorawo-chan, you really are a psychopath, huh?”

She shook her head in dismay. I gave her a somewhat miffed response.

“I’ve been meaning to say this for a while, but that’s not a word you should be casually throwing around at people, is it? Isn’t this harassment?”

“Oh, shove off! If this counts as harassment, what you’re doing to me is straight-up abuse!”

“Why?! I’m trying to save you here!”

“Not now, I mean how you normally treat me.”

“Please don’t talk nonsense.”

As we argued in hushed voices, Kozakura and I quickly walked through the cult building.

5

There were a total of four confinement rooms. We looked at all of them—just in case—but they were all empty, so we hurried on our way.

When I was brought here, I had been rendered unconscious by Runa’s voice, so I didn’t know which way we had come. I tried asking Kozakura, but she had been pretty out of it and couldn’t tell me anything that I could rely on as fact. We had little to go on. There had to be enemies in the direction Kozakura came from, so we were forced to go the opposite way.

The floor and walls in the hall were concrete. There were fluorescent lights placed at intervals on the ceiling and not a single window.

“This is probably underground, huh?”

“Looks like it. Feels like we went down a flight of stairs.”

We were trying to talk in hushed voices, but it echoed more than expected. Looking at one another, we held our breath. Was that a voice in the distance...? I couldn’t be certain. I felt like there were traces of Runa’s voice still clinging to the inside of my eardrums. If I kept quiet, I could hear the whispers coming back to me.

“...We’ll need to find a way up. Let’s look for stairs,” I said.

Kozakura nodded.

“Still not up to walking on your own?”

“Sorry...”

“It’s okay. Let’s go.”

As I walked down the hall with Kozakura hanging off one of my arms, there came a path that diverged off to the right. The way ahead was coming to a dead

end soon, and the two doors there had signs indicating they led to the men's and women's restrooms.

"Want to go fix your makeup, Sorawo-chan?"

"I thought you weren't in the habit of going to the bathroom together with other people."

"...Did I say that?"

"If anyone came after us, there'd be nowhere to run, so please try to hold it in. Let's try going this way."

We turned right in front of the washrooms, and the hall soon came to a dead end at a heavy-looking metal door. There was a lever we could move to retract the bolt on the door, allowing us to open it. Was this not so much a door as a hatch? I put my ear to it, but I couldn't hear anything—maybe because the metal was so thick.

There was no time to waste wandering around, so I gave the lever a pull. There was a loud *clacking* sound as the door bolt disengaged.

The metallic sound echoed down the corridor and faded away. I watched and waited for a moment, then slowly opened the hatch. It was pitch black inside. I felt around next to the door and managed to locate a switch. The lights came on when I pressed it, instantly brightening the area in front of me.

Once my eyes adjusted to the brightness, there was a narrow hall ahead, and six more rooms with peepholes in their doors on either side of it. There were sounds of stirring inside the rooms, but no voices.

There was another door at the end of the hall. This one was a wooden door, its paint stripped by dampness and mold, and all it had was a simple doorknob with no keyhole.

"More confinement rooms? This is a long way from where we were taken, though..."

"Shh. I'm going to take a peek."

I opened a crack in the peephole of the nearest door and peered in. There was a slapping sound from inside, and it was clear someone was there. In the

dim lighting, I could see a room that was close to seven square meters. Once my eyes adjusted, I could see the whole floor was padded. So were the walls. *It's pretty different from the room they put me in*, I was thinking, when something fell from the ceiling and slammed into the ground.

It was a person.

In front of my shocked eyes, the person who had just fallen slowly stood up. It was a man. He was wearing a slightly dirty pink shirt with slacks. His feet were bare. The man's neck was twisted in my direction. The side of his face was smushed completely flat. His eyes, nostrils, and mouth looked like clay that had been whacked against the wall—just slits on a flat surface. Despite this, he didn't seem to be in any pain at all. The next moment, he vanished, then some seconds later he slammed to the floor once again.

I gently closed the peephole's cover.

"What is it?" Kozakura asked.

"It's a Fourth Kind."

"Huh?"

"There's a Fourth Kind in there."

A person who had experienced physical changes to their body and mind as a result of the influence of the other world—a fourth kind contactee. Toriko and I had also had encounters of the fourth kind—and I had no doubt Runa Urumi had, too—but we learned afterward that we'd been fairly lucky. It seemed that in most cases, people who were in contact with the other world underwent a serious transformation. Even if they survived, they could never go back to the life they'd had before.

The others may have noticed us, because the sounds from beyond the other doors grew louder. There were sounds like the grinding of teeth, the rough sounds of two long objects grinding together... They were muffled, perhaps by the padding, but none of them were sounds a sane human being would make. Just like we had seen at the DS Lab, there were a number of Fourth Kinds interned here, too.

"Do you want to look?" I turned and asked Kozakura, but she shook her head

vigorously.

“Do you think... they’re trying to treat the victims, too?”

“I don’t know. The rooms are padded, at least.”

When we opened the wooden door at the back, we discovered that it was a closet. There was an LED lantern, the type you might use while camping, hanging from the end of a steel rack. I lit it, and there were bags of goldfish food, fertilizer for plants, car batteries and chains, army gloves, and more. There were a bunch of cleaning supplies in a tall, thin locker like the kind you might see in a school. The end of the mop was stained with a bright green liquid.

“Looks like another dead end here.”

“Damn... Do we have to go back?”

When we turned back to the hatch, I noticed a noise. I heard several sets of footsteps from far down the hall.

“People are coming.”

“For the toilet?”

“There’s more than one or two of them.”

I pulled the handle inside the hatch, trying to close it as quietly as possible. I then pushed the switch next to the door. That left the LED lantern as our sole source of light.

“We’re going to hide. Get in the back. Hurry.”

“But where...?”

“The locker’s the only place. You go on ahead.”

“...Seriously?”

I hurried Kozakura along, and we got in the locker together. I reached to turn off the lantern, plunging us in complete darkness. If we closed the door, it would be too tight—I’d likely end up crushing Kozakura.

“Are you okay?”

“Murrgh.”

That reply sounded unhappy. It seemed she could breathe, though, so we were good. With the closet door in the way, I could hardly hear the Fourth Kinds anymore. All we could hear in the suffocating darkness was our own breath. I was breathing fast, and so was Kozakura. Her body was quivering. Oh, right. Now that I thought about it, she was way more prone to fear than I was.

I heard the echo of the hatch opening. Multiple sets of footsteps came inside, and they were talking.

“We’ll use #2 and #3. Bring the chains.”

“Okay.”

“What about #5?”

“#5 kills too often. I want to pull out immediately once we have what we’re after. It would be fine if we were going to kill them all, but now is not the appropriate time for that.”

“Understood.”

The door to the closet opened, and a light shone through the long, thin air holes in the locker door. I could feel Kozakura stiffen... It’d be bad if she cried out. I instinctively hugged her head close, pressing it against my belly. She’d have to put up with a little discomfort.

The guys who came into the closet were right beside the locker, rummaging through the things on the steel rack. I heard the clinking of chains. Kozakura started to shake harder and harder in my arms. I needed to calm her down... but how? There was nothing else I could do, so I tried patting her on the head.

Surprisingly, Kozakura’s shaking stopped.

This was effective? I was dubious. Kozakura didn’t move at all. I started to suspect that she had suffocated and died.

The guy left the closet with the chains, and I heard them open a metal door. There was a mumbling voice, somewhere between man and beast. The sound of metal fittings and chains continued for a while.

“We’re good to go.”

“Good. We’ll hurry to the Round Hole.”

The footsteps, which had increased in number, left in a hurry, and the hatch closed hard.

We waited for about a minute, but there was no sign of them coming back. I let out the breath I had been holding, and finally realized I had been patting Kozakura’s head all this time.

I stopped, then pushed open the locker door.

“It’s all right now.”

I moved away from her, and went outside. The closet and cell doors were left wide open, the lights still on.

“Looks like those guys were in a real hurry.”

I turned back because there was no response, and Kozakura was still in the locker scrutinizing me. Her face was a bright shade of red, perhaps because she’d been having trouble breathing.

“Kozakura-san—”

“Why did you pat it?”

“Huh? What?”

“Why did you pat my head just now?”

“Uh, I figured I needed to get you to calm down a bit.”

Kozakura’s shoulders heaved with each breath.

“Did I do something to offend you?”

“Don’t you ever... touch my... No, damn it... Ahh....”

“Come again?”

“It’s fine. Forget it.”

Kozakura shook her head, finally getting out of the locker. At some point, she had recovered enough to walk on her own. For some reason she kept her distance from me, peering dubiously into the open cells instead.

“This isn’t for treatment. They’re keeping the Fourth Kinds like pets.”

“Think they can make them obey?”

“I dunno. What I can say is that none of the patients at the DS Lab understood words, but—”

At that moment, one of the iron doors was struck from the inside. Kozakura jumped into the air and clung to me. “What, what, what, what?!”

When I saw the number 5 above the door, the conversation from earlier flashed through my mind. “#5 kills too often...” they’d said.

“Sai! Sai! Nngah! Oh! Nahhh!”

There was a howling voice—I couldn’t imagine those were human words. There was another bang on the door. It repeated again. Each time, the hinges holding it to the wall shrieked.

“...Let’s get going. This guy knows we’re here,” I said, and Kozakura nodded vigorously.

I took the lantern from the closet and opened the hatch. Peering out through the crack, I confirmed there was no one around, then returned to the hall.

Once the hatch was closed, I could no longer hear #5’s howling.

“What was that...? Did you see it, Sorawo-chan?”

“I haven’t looked, but that guy’s messed up bad.”

I held up the lantern and jogged down the hall, stopping at the corner. On the right were the toilets from before and a dead end. On the left was the path we initially came down. I heard footsteps from there again. More of them than last time. There were probably more than five people.

“Let’s hide in the toilets until they pass by.”

“What if they come in?”

“From what I saw earlier, she has more male followers than female. If we hide in the ladies’ toilet, they might not find us immediately.”

We rushed into the women’s room. Surprisingly, it wasn’t that filthy inside. The pastel-colored tiles reflected the lantern’s light. It was a night and day difference between this and the unsophisticated interiors we had passed by so

far. I headed for the door that was furthest back, looking to hide in one of the stalls.

“...What?” Kozakura muttered in surprise.

There was no toilet in the stall, only concrete stairs leading down.

“...Oh! I know this one,” I said despite myself.

“What do you mean, you know it?”

“This is ‘The Round Hole in the Basement,’” I explained to the suspicious Kozakura. “There’s net lore like this. There’s stairs leading down, hidden in the last toilet stall at a cult facility.”

The Round Hole in the Basement was an account given by a group of high school students who snuck into a suspicious building. The boys set out to explore a building owned by a new religious movement out in the boonies, and found a hidden staircase to the basement in the toilet. Once there, they witness strange things...

“You want to say this is a phenomenon of the other world?”

“It’s a little half-baked for that. The guys who came and took away the Fourth Kinds earlier said they were going to hurry to the Round Hole. They could be deliberately overlapping with it, the same way they used the self-responsibility type stories. They’re deliberately reconstructing the elements of a horror story.”

“In the original story, what happens if you go down this hole?”

“If I recall, there was something like a round gate. When the narrator passes through it, he’s sent to another world that’s a little different from the one he came from.”

Even as we whispered amongst ourselves, the footsteps were approaching from outside the restroom.

“They’re coming this way... We’ll have to go down, huh?” I asked, and Kozakura nodded reluctantly. Using the lantern to light the area at our feet, I stepped onto the stairs.

There was a landing a little ways down, and it met with another downward

staircase from the opposite direction there. It seemed they'd been kind enough to install a hidden staircase in the men's room, too. We descended another level, and the stairs stopped there. There was a pair of double doors at the end. I slowly opened them, and on the other side was a room about twenty-five square meters in size lit with orange lights. In the center of the room there was a massive iron ring so large that it could touch the walls on either side of it.

"This is a dead end. Is your eye picking up anything, Sorawo-chan?"

I focused on my right eye, and there was a thin, wavering film, like a translucent silver bubble, inside the ring.

"It's a gate. I couldn't say where it leads, though."

"Can we go through?"

"If Toriko were here."

Unfortunately, we couldn't use the gate as is. Like the one that appeared in Kozakura's garden, this one was meaningless without some means, like Toriko's left hand, to open it.

Toriko...

Where was she now? The cult's abduction team was supposed to have gone out to capture her again. Hopefully, she was getting away all right. The worries I had forced deep down into my heart began to surface again, but I managed to swallow them somehow.

I heard footsteps enter the restroom above. They were coming this way.

There was nowhere to hide in this room. Kozakura drew close to me, but all we could do was wait helplessly.

If I used my right eye, would we be able to escape in the ensuing chaos? As my eyes raced around the room, trying to find a way out of this, I saw a slug-like sliver of phosphorescence peeking out of Kozakura's ears, too. If she was left alone, Kozakura might be taken into the cult. That said, even if I could see it, I couldn't touch it with my hands.

"There's nothing to do here," I told a frowning Kozakura. "Kozakura-san, you covered for me when we were originally talking to Runa Urumi upstairs, right?"

“You noticed that?”

“Well, yeah. Of course. Thank you.”

“You’re acting creepy all of a sudden.”

“I thought I’d say it while I still can.”

“Well, I am an adult, unlike you.”

The heavy footsteps descended the stairs, and the double doors opened. Runa entered the room with more than ten bodyguards.

“Oh! Found you.” Runa said in an inappropriately cheery voice as she pointed towards us.

In my right eye, I could see the lines of her voice all flying out of her throat and toward us. I tried to bat them away, but they passed through my hand without me feeling anything. Those lines entered both my ears, leaving a throbbing reverberation.

Kozakura’s back shuddered, and in a self-mocking tone she said, “If I was going to run into you again, I should’ve brought earplugs.”

“...I’m pretty sure they wouldn’t actually work.”

The cultists surrounded us as we cowered. In their hands they carried stun guns, harpoon guns, and pepper spray. Only one had an actual gun. My Makarov. I felt the anger well up inside me instantly.

Don’t touch that. It’s mine. That’s my Makarov. Toriko gave it to me.

“I wondered where you’d gotten off to, and you came all the way here without permission. I can’t let my guard down for a second, can I?” Runa said admonishingly.

“I didn’t see any signs saying ‘Keep out.’”

“Oh, it’s fine. I’m not blaming you. I’m more interested in how you got out of jail.”

Runa circled around to the left of me.

“The guy I assigned to you was a complete mess. He wouldn’t do anything but scream and thrash for a while. It was so bad he couldn’t even hear my voice.

That's never happened before. I was surprised. It scared me. When he finally calmed down—I heard about it. What you did with that eye of yours."

Stopping at a point diagonally behind me, Runa continued.

"The evil eye, was it? You really do have it. This is the first time I've met a girl other than me who has such a powerful and beautiful gift. Sorawo Kamikoshi-chan, was it? I think we could be friends."

"Not gonna happen."

"Why not?"

"I hate cults."

"What cult? You mean what I'm doing? This is just a fan club. I don't mind disbanding it once I find Satsuki-sama. They'll all be too happy to disappear. Isn't that right, everyone?"

"Yes! That's right!"

"We'll disappear! Immediately!"

The cultists all shouted in unison.

"See?"

"Shut up," I said through teeth gritted with disgust. "What I want is for the two of us to be able to go home, right now, together. If you lay a hand on Toriko, I'll never forgive you. I'll drive your whole fan club insane—make them bite through their own tongues."

"...!" Behind me, Runa gulped, then began to walk again. She passed directly behind me and continued circling around the opposite side.

"...Kamikoshi-san, you're wonderful. Very cool. I want you as a friend even more now. If it gets you so angry, I want to get my hands on Toriko-san, too. That'll get you real fired up. If I pour my voice inside you then, I wonder what kind of face you'll make, hmm...?"

My head suddenly cooled.

Okay. I get you.

If that's how you want to play it, I'll take you out right here. Your luck ran out

when you carelessly got so close to me. If I grab and pull you in close to me, your followers will be hesitant to use their guns and whatever. That's when I'll use my right eye.

Having made up my mind, I glared at Runa who was to the right of me, and was about to spring when...

"What's wrong? Why the scary face?" Runa smiled.

In front of me, I saw Runa hugging Kozakura from behind. I redirected my attention at the last moment, right before I would have caught Kozakura in the crossfire.

"Whoa. Did something just come flying?"

Runa put a hand to her forehead, deliberately shaking her head.

"I felt woozy for a moment there. Scary stuff."

Kozakura looked at me with her eyes wide. Her lips trembled, but she didn't utter a word.

"Honestly, it doesn't matter if you hate it. If I whisper, 'Be my friend,' to you, that's all it takes. But we wouldn't be real friends that way, now would we?"

Runa began returning to her original position, holding the non-resisting Kozakura like she was some kind of teddy bear. She stopped right in front of me.

"Well, if I have to, I'll use my voice, but that takes time, you know? I'm a little busy at the mo—"

Mid-sentence, Runa looked behind me, and called out.

"Welcome hooome."

That made me look, too, just as a group of several men came out of the silver gauze of the gate. These were some of her more muscular followers, and they were armed with nail guns and crowbars.

Just one of them had nothing. He was clearly a Fourth Kind. From the shoulders of his dingy jumpsuit up, he was like a mass of white mushroom, and the thin, wiggling eyelash-like organs growing out of the edge of it were

affecting the silver phosphorescence that filled the iron ring. It looked like they were organs that could open the gate, like Toriko's left hand. The reason he was so docile and obedient might have been that he had been tamed with Runa's voice.

"Luna-sama, the other side of the Round Hole is clear," the leader of the advance squad said.

"Okaaay. Let's go then. Wait just a moment, Kamikoshi-san. Everyone, keep an eye on her. She'll try to run off in nooo time."

"We understand, Luna-sama!"

"Okay, you come along, too, Kozakura-san."

"What are you planning to do...?" I asked as Runa took Kozakura's hand and headed towards the gate.

"Would you explain for her, Kozakura-san?"

At Runa's indication, Kozakura turned back to face me. "She plans to go to the DS Lab. When I gave her information on the DS Lab, she found out about Satsuki's notes... She intends to steal the notes, and use them to summon Satsuki."

"That's right. I had found out that Satsuki-sama worked with some lab or something, but never knew who they really were, you know? The Dark Science Lab, was it? They were enough of a surprise on their own, but to think they had her notes, too! I need to have them. What's more... Kamikoshi-san, I hear you can read those notes, right?"

This was depressing. She already knew everything. I could see why Kozakura's interrogation had taken so long.

"So, you see—I *need* you to be my friend, or I'm in a bit of a bind. Let's discuss the rest when I get back."

Runa smiled at me, then stepped inside the gate.

"Wai—!"

I tried to chase after her, but her followers surrounded me. Before there was any chance to use my right eye, the bag was over my head again. Countless

hands grabbed me as I struggled, and carried me off to somewhere.

We climbed the stairs and walked down a long corridor. Even if I couldn't see, it became clear along the way that we had gone back down the path I had originally come from, but I lost track after that.

We turned a number of times, climbed some flights of stairs, went outside, and then back inside again. I was suddenly put down, and made to sit on a chair. As they bound my hands behind it, one of them spoke up.

"I will keep watch. The rest of you—go rest."

"Understood, Chief."

Several sets of footsteps departed, and it got quiet.

Suddenly, the one man who remained spoke.

"Luna-sama said to watch you. However, unexpected accidents can happen."

What's this guy talking about?

"The power of that eye—it's simply too dangerous. Luna-sama seems awfully interested in it, but I do not think a monster like you should be let anywhere near Luna-sama."

Finally, I got it.

Oh, crap—this guy's gonna kill me.

"...If you lay a hand on me, you'll be scolded."

"You're right. I expect I will be. But you're still not anyone special to Luna-sama yet. Not her *friend*, at least. The one Luna-sama is really obsessed with is Satsuki-sama. Not you."

I could hear the complicated emotions whirling beneath plain speech. This guy was jealous. Runa Urumi, the object of his adulation, had taken an interest in me, who had come out of nowhere.

"I can make any number of excuses. You turned your evil eye on me, and I shot you in my frenzied state—is what I think will be the simplest script. You have a record, after all. I lost my senses when she laid that eye on me, and when I regained them I had already pulled the trigger. Oh, how could this have

happened? ...If I beg for forgiveness like that, Luna-sama should be convinced.”

I felt something press against my head through the bag. Even without seeing it, I knew—it was the barrel of a gun. My Makarov.

“This is for Luna-sama anyway. If you survive, you’re sure to bring harm to her.”

Even after all this time trying to keep my cool, I had to panic a little now. I was going to be shot to death here? By a cultist driven mad by jealousy? Without ever seeing Toriko again?

“...Hold on. Calm down.” My voice trembled. That was no good. If he sensed my fear, he’d just get cockier. If I underestimated him, I’d die. That’s how these things worked.

Wetting my lips, I continued.

“Think this through calmly. Runa Urumi needs my eye. She wants to read Satsuki Uruma’s research notes.”

Though, having read them once already, I thought that was madness.

“So, if you kill me, she’ll be really disappointed, and angry. Especially when she’d just gotten her hands on Satsuki-sama’s notes.”

“It pains me to sadden Luna-sama, but she is the one I follow, not Satsuki-sama. When she finds Satsuki-sama, Luna-sama will surely dissolve her ‘fan club.’ If she does, I’ll lose everything.”

When he pushed the barrel against me even harder, I started talking faster despite myself.

“I-If you shoot me with the bag on my head, won’t that spoil the plan you were just talking about? If the script’s that I used my eye, and you went crazy, you need to take the bag off first or—”

“I won’t fall for that. Give up and die.”

The man took a deep breath, then stopped. *I’m gonna get shot...!* Even though I couldn’t see anything beneath the bag, I squeezed my eyes shut tight.

There was the echo of a gunshot.

...

“...Huh?”

As I realized I was still alive, the man raised his voice in panic.

“That sound was—”

More gunshots. Continuous this time. They echoed, so they were from inside the building. There were screams mixed in with them.

“Who’s there?!”

The man shouted angrily, and almost simultaneously three shots rang out. There was another shot, louder than the rest. The sound of the bullet tearing through the air. Then, a dull impact.

The man behind me groaned, then dropped to the floor.

Footsteps ran over to me, and then around in front of me. The bag was torn from my head.

I looked up, and there was a blonde woman, staring at me, out of breath.

“Toriko...!”

“Sorry for the wait, Sorawo,” Toriko said, then hugged me tight. She smelled of sweat and gunpowder. There was no doubt about it: this was the real, living Toriko.

6

“Why... are you here?” I mumbled, still unable to believe it. This was just too convenient... Was this an illusion my brain was showing me right before my inevitable death? But the realness of the Toriko here, right before my eyes, was enough to blow away all that doubt.

The jacket and the camo pants I was used to seeing during our forays into the other world. The boots on her feet. The AK hanging from a sling and the Makarov in a holster.

Toriko cut the plastic ties that were binding my wrists, and I stood up from the chair. Turning to look, I saw the man lying face down, clutching his thigh and

groaning. He wasn't dead, but he'd lost a lot of blood. Unconcerned, Toriko was doing a thorough check of the man's body.

Once I was up and had picked up my Makarov from the ground, Toriko passed me a sheathed knife.

"Huh? What's this?"

"I took it off this guy. You hold it."

I took the knife as instructed and was then handed a water bottle. I was feeling parched, so I accepted it gladly. I gulped down half of it and was catching my breath when Toriko looked down at the man. "What do we do with this *thing*?" she asked. "Just leave him?"

"Won't he die?" I asked, but Toriko shook her head.

"Dunno. Honestly, this is my first time shooting a guy."

Toriko had asked me once before: could I shoot a person? It looked like she'd been prepared to do it herself, at least. No... If I'm being honest, I feel like I already knew that. Even before now, Toriko had shot several things that could only have looked like human beings to her on my command.

I was prepared to do it, too. But...

"You okay? Do you feel sick?" Toriko leaned over and peered at me, her brow furrowed with concern.

"Nah. It's just... Once I saw your face, it kinda took the edge off."

"Get it together, will you? I think there are still enemies around."

Even as I nodded, I was at a loss internally.

Up until a moment ago, I could have put a bullet in this guy's head and finished him off without hesitation. I mean, he was a cultist, he tried to kill me, he took the gun that meant so much to me, and I'd have actually felt a bit sorry for him, leaving him in pain like this.

But I couldn't convince myself to do it now. Not since I'd seen Toriko's face.

It was like magic.

The harsh me, surrounded by enemies and prepared to do anything to

survive, melted away the moment I saw Toriko's face. The me when I was acting alone, and the me when I was together with Toriko were like two entirely different people.

This wasn't the time to agonize over that, but it troubled me. As I stared down at the bleeding man, feeling indecisive, other footsteps closed in.

I looked up quickly. On closer inspection, this was the open room that Kozakura and I had originally been brought to. Seeing a figure climbing the stairs in the corner, I took aim with my Makarov.

"Sorawo, wait. It's okay." Toriko put a hand on my arm. The one who appeared from the stairs—was Migiwa of the DS Lab.

He had taken off his suit and was wearing just a shirt and vest. His sleeves were rolled up, and he held a shotgun. The barrel had an alligator-like attachment on it, and I realized it was the gun that Kozakura had used before. There was a collapsible police baton hanging from his waist, too. Looking at me, he smiled just a little.

"Oh, good. You were all right."

"Even Migiwa-san's here..."

They came to save us together? How had they found this place? No, where even was this place? I had a lot of questions, and no idea which one to ask first, when Migiwa rushed over to our side. With his sleeves rolled up, I could see a tattoo dense with Mayan text on his arm. There was a sheathed machete on his back. Scary... There was no way this guy was a law-abiding citizen.

"Where is Kozakura-san?" he asked, and I snapped to my senses. Right! This was no time to be staring off into space. I spoke up, probably later than I should have. "She was taken by Runa Urumi. She's planning on going to the DS Lab through the gate!"

"The DS Lab? What for?" Toriko asked with a dubious look on her face. I was a bit hesitant to answer.

"...To steal Satsuki Uruma's notes."

"Wha?!"

When I quickly explained that they were a cult with knowledge of the other world, Migiwa's face grew grim.

"Please, tell me how many headed to the DS Lab."

"I don't know the exact numbers, but I think there were more than ten. From what I saw, they don't have guns, but they're armed with construction tools. There were two Fourth Kind contactees with them, too. Every one of them is brainwashed by Runa Urumi's voice. Kozakura-san's been hit by it, too."

"This is bad. There's hardly anyone at the DS Lab right now. They'll be free to tear the place apart," Migiwa whispered, pulling out his smartphone and putting it to his ear.

"What does she want something like Satsuki's notes for?" Toriko asked me in the meantime.

"...They're going to try to use them to summon Satsuki-san from the other world. Runa Urumi worships her."

"..."

"Though she's never actually met her."

"...I see."

When I added that last bit, Toriko looked a little relieved. It was a number of times now that I had seen Toriko get hurt when she realized the Satsuki Uruma that she loved and respected had been out picking up other girls when she wasn't around. I felt a mix of concern for Toriko, and irritation that she wouldn't just get over the woman already. It made me want to shout out loud.

Migiwa returned his phone to his pocket. "I can't make contact. It seems the situation has gotten bad. Could I ask you to show me to the gate?"

"The thing is, I was blindfolded most of the way... This guy ought to know, though," I said, indicating the man bleeding at my feet, and Migiwa knelt down next to him.

"Do you want help? If you tell us where the gate is, I'll stop the bleeding."

"Shut up... I could never... betray Luna-sama..."

Yeah, I didn't expect that to work. If he's that fanatically devoted to Runa Urumi, dying for her's easy—or so I had begun to resignedly think, but then I suddenly had an idea.

“Oh! Right, Toriko, your left hand!”

“Sure, sure, what is it this time?”

Totally used to it at this point, Toriko grabbed the glove on her left hand with her teeth as she pulled it off.

“The space next to this guy's ear, grab it hard.”

“Right, right... Whoa?!”

In my right field of vision, the bonds of Voice wrapped around the man's head began thrashing around as Toriko seized them in her translucent hand.

At the same time, he let out a scream. “What're you doing?! Stop!”

“Sorawo, this thing's flopping around in my hand!”

“Good! Now give it a yank!”

“Whaa... Ergh! Come out, you!”

Toriko pulled with brute force, dragging the Voice out of the man's head. The man screamed and his eyes rolled back.

“Wh-Wh-What do I do with it now?!”

“Err, no clue... Try crushing it!”

“You need to think of this stuff first!” Keeping it as far from her body as possible, Toriko squeezed her left hand.

The Voice scattered, like a creature made out of water. I felt an echo of Runa's whispering voice deep in my ears, and my head sunk into my shoulders a bit.

“Did you do something to him?” Migiwa asked, looking up, and I nodded.

“He may be more reasonable now. Try one more time.”

Migiwa produced a small tube with some liquid from a pouch. He flicked the cap with his thumb to remove it, revealing a needle. When he jabbed it into the

man's neck, he gasped for breath and regained consciousness.

"Wh-What did you do...? What did you steal from me...?!"

Confusion gradually spread through the man's wide eye's. You could see the sense of loss. In mere seconds, the man hung his head, and he seemed to shrink noticeably.

"I will only say this once more. If you lead us to the gate, I will save your life."

The man nodded easily, and powerlessly, in response.

"Hey, Sorawo... What did I pull out of this guy?" Toriko asked as she shook her left hand. I thought for a moment before responding.

"His faith... I guess."

While Migiwa was staunching the bleeding, the man obediently told us the way there. Leave this place, cut across the yard and enter the building across from here, go up a floor, then down two floors using another staircase. From there, follow the underground passages right, left, left, straight, and there was a washroom at the end of the hall... In terms of location, it was under the building we were in now, but he said there was no means of going down there directly from here.

I considered the possibility that he was lying, of course, but it matched what my own sense of direction had told me. I would have wanted to bring him along as a guide, but the leg that had been shot by the AK was hurt pretty bad. The man did not resist at all as Migiwa stopped the bleeding, then proceeded to bind him with plastic ties. I couldn't decide if that was because his wound had left him groggy, or because of the loss of faith.

We couldn't wait around here forever. Once we were ready to go, we hurried downstairs.

We left the building that was like a factory with all the machines removed, and came out into a yard with large buildings surrounding it on three sides. It might be better to say this was not so much a courtyard as an empty lot. The gravel on the ground had thick grass growing up through it, like a parking lot that had been left abandoned for many long years.

The time on Toriko's watch said it was late at night—3:00 a.m. to be exact. It was completely silent. The area around us was pitch dark, the premises were surrounded by trees, and the stars in the sky were clearly visible.

“Where is this?”

“The mountains of Saitama. Near Hannou.”

Hannou... That was far west of Shakujii-kouen on the Seibu Ikebukuro Line.

“How did you figure out we were here?” I asked as we ran across the yard.

“When the two of you were abducted, I contacted Migiwa-san. He came as soon as I explained the situation, and we talked about it. He figured the guys who grabbed you two would be back for sure.”

“Why?”

“You had a gun on you when you were taken, so they had to know we wouldn't be going to the police. They would either contact us using the gun as blackmail material, or break into Kozakura's now uninhabited house.”

“My initial assumption was that this was a profit kidnapping, and that Kozakura-san was their target. I believed you were only caught up in it. I never would have imagined it was a cult,” Migiwa explained.

“Migiwa-san and I waited for them at Kozakura's house, with traps set up in the garden and entrance hall. They came faster than we expected, so we almost didn't make it in time. Migiwa-san clobbered the guys who fell for them...”

“...Traps?”

“We may need to apologize to Kozakura a bit later. We put some nails and holes in the walls, and maybe broke some things...”

“A-And?”

“There were four in total, but Migiwa-san took them all out. It was incredible.”

“I may have done too much. I was surprised to see how well Nishina-san worked. Your mother must have trained you well.”

“I don't know about that. I was just in such a hurry to rescue the two of

them.”

“Toriko...”

Putting herself in danger for me like this. It touched my heart, but at the same time I was a little frustrated. I wish I could have seen Toriko then. I was jealous of Migiwa for not only getting to see it, but being her battle buddy, too.

No... Don't be like that, me. Migiwa put himself in danger to come here, too.

“And this place? How did you hear about it from them?” I asked while I was trying to change my thinking. Would cultists spill their guts so easily? Or did they resort to torture or something?

“Migiwa-san made me wait outside while he did the interrogation,” Toriko said, sounding dissatisfied. Migiwa turned his head to the side.

“You can leave such things to me. It's not a job for a normal person.”

“Wha... What exactly did you do to them?”

As I was imagining some gruesome scene of torture, Migiwa smiled. “Have no fear. I didn't put so much as a scratch on them. I merely borrowed the bathtub and some towels, and we played with the water for a bit. Though, I neglected to clean up before we left, so I may also owe Kozakura-san an apology.”

I didn't know exactly what he did, but I was sure of one thing. No way was this guy a law-abiding citizen.

“...Your arms look pretty awesome,” I said.

Looking down at his arms covered in Mayan text, Migiwa smiled shyly. “This is embarrassing. It was a youthful indiscretion. I was doing some things in Central America a long time back.”

“Some things?”

“The castanets were in vogue at the time... No, let's not bother with that story.”

From the way Migiwa spoke, it sounded like a story he'd rather forget. If it weren't for the situation, I'd have wanted to press him for the details.

We entered the building across the yard. There were wooden fences on either

side of the hall. Inside them, they were divided into a number of enclosures. In one of those enclosures there were stairs up to the floor above.

“Kind of an odd layout, huh?” Toriko whispered suspiciously.

It was odd, yes. It was like a barn, but there were no signs it had been used. Besides, why would you put stairs to the upper floor in a cow’s stall?

Even though I thought it was suspicious, I still ran up the stairs. There was a hall lined with glassless windows, and when I peered into rooms as I passed by, there was one with nothing but a long line of urinals, a kitchen that contained a mannequin torso that belonged in a clothing store, a child’s room with “HELP” written on the wall in red paint, and more bizarre scenes.

“What is this place...? There’s no sign of anyone having lived here. It’s like a haunted house,” Toriko said, sounding creeped out.

“It’s deliberate. These guys use the props from ghost stories to contact the other world.”

“Is there some sort of motif here?”

“This is, unquestionably, *The Farm in the Mountains*.”

The Farm in the Mountains was a famous true ghost story. This story, which became topical when a celebrity told the story like it really happened to them, involved a series of events at a bizarre facility.

There was a farm-like building that was still under construction in the mountains. There were no cows there, and no people, either. The stairs to the second floor hadn’t been put in yet, and there was a room covered in ofuda. This place was ensconced in a bizarre atmosphere, and despite it actually existing, no one knew what it really was.

I could see some elements of the design of the building we were now in seemed to have been lifted from that story. If I considered their goal, it wasn’t surprising. Speak of the devil and he shall appear—they were trying to use a building to test the theory that speaking of something frightening could draw it closer. If I thought of the way they had spread the self-responsibility type stories as a part of that same flow, it made sense. Their activities were all ritualized attempts to contact the other world.

That their ultimate goal was to summon Satsuki Uruma made me think: *Are you people crazy?* But for the person beside me, it was no laughing matter.

I could understand how the man who tried to kill me felt. He worshiped Runa Urumi, yet all she spoke of was Satsuki-sama. The more he served her, the further she went away from him. It must have been hard on him. Never would have thought I'd find myself sympathizing with a cultist.

"Sorawo, is something up?" Toriko called out to me, and I looked up.

"Huh? Nothing, really."

"You sure? You were looking a little depressed." Toriko cocked her head to the side a bit as she looked at me.

"I'm fine. Thanks," I replied with a smile.

She's sure paying close attention to me, huh? Geez.

Once we found another set of stairs and descended two floors, we came upon an underground passage. Migiwa took point and Toriko brought up the rear as we advanced cautiously. I was in the middle.

Along the way, we came to a place I recognized. There was the sound of weeping from inside the confinement room. Even when we passed in front of the cell, it didn't stop.

"What's all that about?" Toriko asked in a quiet voice.

"I dunno?" I said. The look in Toriko's eyes seemed like she wanted to say something. It pierced into me.

She suspects me of something. I'm offended.

We encountered no cultists along the way. Descending the hidden stairs in the toilet, we were finally standing in front of the Round Hole again.

"This gate is connected to the DS Lab?" Migiwa asked.

"That's what they were saying."

"Let's hurry. We gotta save Kozakura," Toriko said hurriedly.

"Okay. Walk in front of the iron ring, then."

“Okay.”

We approached the Round Hole with Toriko leading the way. I focused on my right eye, and the silver haze shimmered in front of my eye.

“All right. Now touch the space inside the ring.”

Toriko reached out with her left hand, and touched the curtain.

“I-It’s there... I just pull it back, right?”

“Right. Give it a good hard yank.”

Toriko swung her left arm wide.

Bang! On the other side of the parted curtains, there was a dimly lit parking garage.

We leapt through as the thin membrane began to recover on its own.

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The gate closed behind us. We were in the underground parking garage beneath the building that housed the DS Lab. No one was here. We walked between the luxury cars parked here as we hurried to the elevator.

When Migiwa pressed the up button, the bell chimed and the door opened. When we got in, the control panel had been forced open, and the hidden keypad that allowed you to go to the DS Lab floors was exposed.

Migiwa plugged in the number and the elevator began to rise.

“We will have to reconsider our security measures,” Migiwa said.

We each checked our magazines as we waited for the elevator to arrive.

“From what you saw, Kamikoshi-san, what poses the greatest threat?” he asked.

“Runa Urumi’s voice. It’s something like an intangible tentacle from the other world, and it brainwashes you if you keep listening. It can probably pierce through earplugs, too.”

“What are we gonna do about that?” Toriko asked.

“If I’m looking at it, your hand can touch the Voice. Like you did earlier.”

Toriko scowled. “That again...? It feels really weird, you know? Like a living creature. I can’t help but imagine what it looks like.”

“It’s not that gross when you can see it. Don’t worry.”

“Say that after touching it yourself.”

“You mentioned there were two Fourth Kinds as well, correct? Do you know what they were like?”

“One was like Toriko, able to touch substances from the other world. The other I haven’t seen.”

“There were another ten or so humans armed with construction tools in addition to that, yes?”

“Those numbers and weapons were just an educated guess. Treat them accordingly...”

“Thank you. Let me warn you in advance: should the need arise, I will shoot. I believe that may prove shocking to you, but please understand the necessity,” Migiwa explained.

“I understand.”

“Okay.” Toriko and I both nodded.

“How much experience do the two of you have with this sort of thing?”

“This sort of thing?”

“How should I put it...? The in-and-out.”

The in-and-out? There had to be a better way to say that.

“This is my first time doing anything like this.”

“Mama taught me to shoot a gun, but this is my first time actually doing this, too.”

“I understand. I will draw their attention, so you two do your best to stay out of sight and move safely. I can handle the rest somehow, but I will need to ask the two of you to handle Runa Urumi.”

The elevator slowed, then stopped.

The door opened in front of our readied guns, and a dark hall with barely any light appeared before us. Migiwa led the way as we left the elevator, guns ready. The word “LAB” was written on the wall in the elevator hall.

This was the floor with Satsuki Uruma’s research room. I remembered it well.

The area was silent, but there was a sort of uneasiness in the air. Like lots of people had been here until just a little while ago. I peered into the corridor from the elevator hall. There was a single door open, and light leaking out of it.

“That’s Satsuki’s research room,” Toriko said in a hushed voice.

We approached the open door, keeping an eye out as we did.

My expectation that the room must’ve been torn apart proved to be incorrect, and it was actually still neat and tidy.

Though, thinking about it, that should have been obvious, huh? Runa Urumi worshiped “Satsuki-sama,” so she wouldn’t tear it apart like during a household search.

The notebook that had been on the desk last time we came was already gone. If I recall, Migiwa had said it was sent to the UB artifact warehouse.

Once we had cleared the room, Migiwa returned to the doorway.

“They must be on the upper floor. Let’s go.”

“...Yeah,” Toriko said, sounding sad to leave.

“Is something wrong?” I asked.

“...Before, when we were in the dark corridor, there was light pouring out of this room, right? When I saw that, I couldn’t help but think, ‘Oh! Satsuki’s come back.’ So, I’m feeling a bit down...”

I shouldn’t have asked. I got miffed, and told Toriko in a voice I must admit sounded grumpy, “This really isn’t the time, is it? Come on, hurry up and let’s go. Look, Migiwa-san is already going.” I started walking with large strides, taking firm hold of Toriko’s hand.

“Whoa, hold on!”

“Just hurry up, okay?” I half dragged Toriko out of the room.

Migiwa nodded to us, and then continued down the corridor. I followed behind him without letting go of Toriko’s hand. No way was I going to let her look back.

We reached the stairs and started going up. There was the slight echo of voices from up above. One floor up, there was another dark lab, and no one was there. When we climbed another flight of stairs, we came out on a comparatively brighter floor.

Peeking in from the stairs, I saw a white hallway. This was the medical floor where the Fourth Kinds were kept.

There was blood splattered on the floor here and there. Following the blood spots with my eyes, I saw a man slumped against the wall, and a nurse kneeling down, attending to him. The man was the doctor with the shaved head who we had met before.

The doctor was sweating profusely and breathing heavily. There were several nails sticking out of his left shoulder and chest, dyeing his white coat a bright red. He’d been attacked with a nail gun. The doctor and nurse looked up at us. Migiwa brought a finger to his lips, making the gesture for silence. The nurse pointed around the corner, and Migiwa nodded.

Toriko pulled out her smartphone. When she put just the camera around the corner, the hall appeared on screen. We could see two cultists walking down the hall of Fourth Kind treatment rooms towards us.

The walls facing the hall were filled with windows for the treatment rooms. If we fired off a shotgun here, there would be damage to the rooms. While I was thinking about what to do, Migiwa reached for the end of the shotgun, and twisted the spreader. The alligator mouth that had been horizontal was now diagonal. He disengaged the safety, adjusted his grip on the shotgun, and then revealed himself to the enemy.

“Halt! Drop your weapons, or I’ll shoot!”

The two stopped in shock, then started shouting incoherently as they turned their nail guns in our direction.

Migiwa pulled the trigger.

The shot, constrained into a 45 degree angle by the spreader, hit both of them. They fell to the floor, the sound of the gunshot echoing until it faded away.

Migiwa walked over to the fallen men and kicked their nail guns away towards us. They seemed to still be breathing, but were in no condition to resist. Migiwa quickly bound them with plastic ties, then hurried back to us.

“Migiwa. The rest are upstairs,” the doctor said between ragged breaths. “They headed for the warehouse. They’ve got Kozakura-chan.”

“I know—”

That’s when it happened: another man appeared at the door to the stairs. This one had a shotgun in his hands. He raised the barrel, pointing it towards us. Migiwa had his back to us; he hadn’t noticed the man.

“Look o—”

Before I could finish my warning, Toriko fired. The AK’s bullet hit the man in the upper arm, and the impact shook him to the left. He pulled the trigger almost at the same time. The barrel went wide, and the shot tore into the wall above my head.

The man dropped the shotgun and fell down. Toriko turned to look, but when she saw the bullet holes behind me, she went pale.

“Sorawo! Are you hurt?!”

“I-I’m fine!” I shouted back, and Toriko arched her eyebrows, then let out a big sigh of relief.

“Whew... I panicked there.”

Toriko seemed even more shaken up than me, who had nearly been shot to death, so I went over and put my hand on her back.

“I’m fine. Just fine. Didn’t even get a scratch.”

As I patted her back, I could feel the tension in her muscles. Yeah. This situation was a first for Toriko, too. Maybe she was more tense than me

because she had a greater understanding of just how dangerous guns were.

It was true she was a good shot, and the AK made for a reliable weapon. But Toriko was no pro. When she saved me in the mountain farm, Toriko's hands had been quivering then, too. Toriko was a kindhearted girl. She had to be afraid to shoot people, and even more scared to get in a gunfight. She was enduring it for me. Even I had to realize that much.

Migiwa got the shotgun away from the man and bound him like the other two from before. "I apologize. I let my guard down. This is embarrassing."

"Toriko was looking, so I'm fine. Right, Toriko?"

Toriko let out a long breath, then nodded. Through the palm of my hand, I felt her tension lessen slightly. "Thanks. I'm calm now."

"Yeah."

"I'll go take a look, okay?" Toriko moved away from me, and poked her head out the door the man she shot had come from.

"...Doesn't look like any more are coming."

"Roger that. Let us be on our way."

As Migiwa started to walk away, the doctor called after him. "Who are these guys?"

"A cult led by a Fourth Kind. They worship Uruma-san."

"Aw, shit. So that's why they asked me where the notebook is."

"Did you tell them?"

"Before I knew it, I'd blabbed everything, including the door code to the warehouse. It makes no sense."

"You couldn't have done anything. There's no resisting her voice," I said to the frustrated doctor.

"Don't worry about it. Just rest," Migiwa added. "Can I count on you to look after him?"

The latter half of that was directed to the nurse. Seeming to come back to her senses all of a sudden, the nurse nodded.

“Let’s go, Sorawo,” Toriko said.

“Y-Yeah.”

Toriko picked up the shotgun the man had been holding and handed it to me as if that were a perfectly natural thing to do.

As the nurse went about administering first aid, the three of us climbed the stairs.

8

There was a red carpet under the soft lights. The table to the left in the hall in front of the stairs and the reception counter were both polished to a shine, giving the place a relaxed, hotel-like atmosphere. The last time we visited the DS Lab with Kozakura, this was the first floor we got off on.

“They’re here all right,” Toriko said in a quiet voice. I could sense people in the lobby.

“Hold on. I’ll take a look with this.”

I pulled out my smartphone and, like Toriko had done before, I stuck the camera out from inside the stairs and looked at the screen. As expected, there were three cultists watching the lobby. The gunshots down below had, obviously, alerted them to our presence. Worse, these three were all armed with rifles or shotguns. *Oh, yeah*, it occurred to me, *hunting rifles are legal to purchase in Japan, huh?* The conditions were supposed to be strict under normal circumstances, but Runa Urumi’s voice could probably do something about that.

“They’re here!” one of the lookouts shouted. His gun turned our way and he immediately opened fire. The bullet nearly grazed me, so I panicked and pulled my hand back.

The other lookouts fired, too. The bullets tore holes in the wall we were hiding behind, and chunks of trim board flew everywhere.

“This is dangerous. Please, stand back,” Migiwa told us, and we backed away from the corner.

“They’re waiting for us. What now?” I asked.

“The enemy aren’t robots. I figure Migiwa-san and me can win a shoot-out if the two of us take them on together,” Toriko said with a serious look on her face. Migiwa shook his head.

“No, that would be dangerous. I cannot expose the two of you to gunfire.”

“But you don’t wanna get shot either, right, Migiwa-san?”

“If you will pardon my rudeness, I believe I am more ruggedly built than you are, Nishina-san.”

“If you’re going to go that route, then I can say I make a smaller target than you.”

They had both naturally excluded me from their fighting force. Yeah, sure, I was useless with a gun, but I didn’t like feeling I was in the way.

“Hey, I’ve got a shotgun, too, you know? The shot spreads, so even I should be able to hit, right?” I interjected, and Toriko frowned.

“It doesn’t spread that far. This is close range, and they’re behind cover, too.”

“Regardless, I believe it would be a poor idea to engage in a straight-up shooting match with them. It would be best if we could raise some sort of smokescreen...”

When they both contradicted me, I was not amused.

“Hmm, well then... How about I make an opening? Do you mind if I try?”

“What’re you planning to do?” Toriko asked.

I got down on all fours and approached the corner again, sticking out the rear-facing camera of my phone. I didn’t want it getting busted, so I was going to pull it back in if they looked like they might shoot, but maybe because they were being wary, no bullets came.

I could see one of them on the phone. If reinforcements came, that would be trouble. We needed to deal with this quickly...

I looked at the three I could see on my phone’s screen and focused my mind on my right eye. Nothing happened at first. Then, after about ten seconds, the

middle one started scratching his head constantly. The other two looked uneasy, too, mumbling curses so loud I could hear them. They clicked their tongues, spat, and glared at one another in irritation.

“What’s going on here?” Toriko, who was looking at the screen from behind me, asked.

“I thought I’d test if my eye worked through the screen, but...”

Finally, unable to bear it anymore, one of them pulled the trigger. There was a boom, and chunks of the reception counter went flying. He hadn’t been aiming at all.

“Get the hell out here!”

“Shut up! The hell do you think you’re doing?!”

“Don’t piss me off! I’ll kill you!”

“Oh, yeah? Why don’t you just try it?”

Things were escalating quickly. Just as I was thinking they might shoot each other, Migiwa leaned out around the corner and opened up with his shotgun.

One, two, three shots. The spreader caught all of his targets, and the three men dropped in no time.

By the time I hesitantly poked my head out, there were no longer any guns turned in our direction.

The men lay bleeding on either side of us as we crossed the smoke-filled lobby.

“That eye... It’s really dangerous, huh?” Toriko said, sounding a little dazed.

Migiwa agreed. “I never would have expected it to work through the screen. Was that something you had tried before?”

“Uh... No, no it wasn’t.”

As I answered, I was reminded once more how messed up my eye was. Maybe they were right to call it the evil eye.

“I’m glad you’re the one who got that eye, Sorawo.”

“Huh? Why?”

“It’d have been terrible if someone bad got it instead,” Toriko said in a somber tone, and I was speechless.

I’ll have to do my best not to be bad, then...

We moved past the lobby, and the entire wall at the end of the hall was taken up by a door that was about four square meters. Looking through the crack where the door was open, I saw thick stone stairs leading upwards.

“The UB artifact warehouse is past here,” Migiwa said and tried to move on, but I stopped him.

“Um, Migiwa-san. Hold on a moment.”

“Yes?”

“I think it would be better if Toriko and I went it alone from here.”

Migiwa turned and furrowed his brow. “Why is that?”

“Her—Runa Urumi’s voice. If you get hit with it, you won’t be able to resist. Like you saw with the doctor downstairs. With my eye, I can see her voice, and Toriko’s hand can knock it away, but we can’t handle any more than that.”

“What will happen to me if I hear the voice?”

“You saw how I drove those guys crazy with my eye just now? She can give more direct orders for what she wants you to do. If you turned your gun on us, we’d be helpless.”

It might have been possible for me to drive Migiwa crazy with my right eye, and override the effect of her voice that way, but I couldn’t predict how the interaction of the two would play out. Besides, considering how skilled with a gun he was, Migiwa would waste no time in shooting me.

“Do you agree, Nishina-san?” Migiwa asked, and Toriko thought for a moment before answering.

“I’m with Sorawo. I wouldn’t want to get in a shoot-out against you.”

“Very well. I will be on standby here, so if you require assistance, please, call me.” Migiwa cleared the way, and indicated the direction of the warehouse

with his right palm. "Please, both of you, be careful."

With those polite words of parting from Migiwa, we turned towards the stairs that led to the warehouse. We climbed, guns ready. There was a thick double-layered hatch at the top of the stairs, and beyond it was an area that resembled a display room in a museum.

The hatch, which normally would have been closed, was wide open. There was a spiral staircase wrapped around the support pillar in the middle of the warehouse.

The wall was lined with a number of glass cases, each filled with a variety of objects. A stuffed cat with five legs, a statue of Mary with cracks that resembled oracle bone script, a Swiss Army knife with tools that could only be meant for torture... All of these were likely items gained through contact with the other world.

I recognized a number of them. The ones they had bought from us. The family photo where the faces occasionally became dogs, and the plant that had grown in the shape of a shirt, both of which were still fresh in my memory, caught my eye. At the bottom of each case was a simple plate bearing a number. I couldn't tell if proudly displaying these items of otherworldly origin showed a composure of the mind, or an insane degree of contempt. As habitual explorers of the other world, we probably weren't in any position to decide one way or the other.

We climbed the stairs, and came to the second floor of the warehouse.

It was an open showroom that used up the entire floor. I tried focusing on my right eye to see what would happen, and the silver glow of the items in the cases made the dark floor shine like a starry sky. Several of them were colored differently, or didn't shine at all. It interested me, but there was no time to go looking around, so we kept on climbing.

The next floor up was also part of the warehouse, but it was slightly different. There were few glass cases here. Instead, there were plastic and metal cases of varying size and shape, along with wooden boxes and simple shelves. They had numbered plates on them, so I could tell the containers must have held UB artifacts. This wasn't a display room, but simple storage.

One of the few glass cases near the stairs was broken. Someone must have stolen whatever was inside.

It had to be Runa Urumi. Did that mean it had held Satsuki Uruma's notes...?

That's when there came a voice from upstairs.

"Oh, you came? Kamikoshi-san."

Beside me, Toriko jumped a little.

"I'm impressed you made it this far. Was it the power of your eye? Wow."

Toriko brought her face close to mine and asked, "This voice—it's Runa Urumi's?"

When I nodded, Toriko rubbed her face, as if trying to refocus herself.

"I get what you were saying now... This voice is nuts."

"I know, right?" I pointed to my right eye. "Let's end this quick. My eye, and your hand. With both of them together, we can take her out."

"Once we've dealt with her voice, what do we do next?"

"What do you mean?"

"What do you want to do with Runa Urumi herself?"

Oh, right...

"Punch her out, then stuff her mouth full of cloth or something?"

"You're so violent..." Toriko criticized.

The voice came from above again.

"Hey, since you're here already, why don't you come up here? Help me out, Kamikoshi-san."

What an attitude...!

Toriko and I looked at one another, nodded, then climbed the spiral staircase.

We finished ascending the stairs and reached the highest floor of the warehouse.

Unlike down below, the walls here were lined with piles of labeled boxes, and there were cabinets overflowing with files. There was a large, latticed skylight in the back, and beneath it was a desk surrounded by potted plants. The strongest impression the place gave off was of a lab at the university.

Runa Urumi was sitting on the desk, and she waved to us. Next to her sat Kozakura in a revolving desk chair, her eyes gazing absently at the thing in her hands.

There were two bizarre silhouettes lying at Runa's feet. One was the Fourth Kind I had seen before, with a head that looked like a large, swollen mass of fungi. The other crawled like a lizard, with the ends of his arms and legs ending in broom-like appendages that branched into many thin filaments. His head was grotesquely shrunken, a mass the size of a person's fist with wrinkles like a pickled plum.

The woman who was reading files on the other side of the desk stood up and, noticing me, began shouting. "Satan! You snake! What have you come here for?! Return from whence you came!"

"Whaa... No way." Toriko shook her head in disbelief.

It was the Thank You Woman. She came with them, too, huh?

"Luna-sama, this one's too dangerous. Why did you leave her alone? Please, don't be so arrogant."

"I didn't exactly leave her alone. I mean, we had everyone downstairs, right? These girls managed to take all of them out? Isn't that amazing?"

I didn't respond, simply turning my shotgun towards Runa.

"Whoa, there."

"Give Kozakura-san back."

"Hey, calm down, okay? If you shoot, you'll hit Kozakura-san, too, you know? Maybe don't threaten me with things you can't do."

"How's this, then?" Toriko said, taking aim with her AK. "I won't miss."

“Ohh, you must be Nishina-san, huh? You really are pretty, just like I heard. I’ve got all sorts of questions for you. Put the guns down—let’s talk, okay?”

I saw something in my right eye. The silver stream left Runa’s mouth, flowing towards Toriko’s and my ears.

“Toriko, sweep it!”

When I raised my voice, Toriko’s left hand quickly swung through the air. The Voice that had been in front of my eyes was knocked back, writhing as it retreated. Runa blinked. “Huh? Did you do something?”

“Your voice won’t work—I can see everything.”

“Oh yeah...?”

I was feeling pretty smug, but Runa didn’t really seem to get it. Thinking about it, Runa didn’t have an eye like mine, so that was only to be expected, I guess. I doubt she’d ever thought of her own voice as having physical form.

“Luna-sama, it’s Nishina-sama. Could her shining hand be interrupting your voice?” the Thank You Woman interjected. “That woman’s evil eye can likely see the workings of your voice. You mustn’t face the eye and hand at the same time.”

The way she talked was cultish and unpleasant, but her powers of perception were not to be underestimated.

“Hmm, so your gifts are partners, too, then,” Runa said to Toriko. “Nishina-san, I heard you’re chasing after Satsuki-sama, too. That puts us in the same position. I think we could get along.”

“Don’t be silly.”

“I’m not. I envy you, Nishina-san. Getting to be with Satsuki-sama, to travel the Blue World together... I’m jealous. If I’m being honest, I’d like to catch you with my voice, and squeeze you for every last drop of what you know about Satsuki-sama. That’s exactly what I was planning to do, in fact.”

The overly friendly tone of voice she had used up to this point sobered, and I thought I caught a glimpse of the seething emotions inside her. It seemed I wasn’t the only one. Toriko’s finger, which was on the AK’s trigger guard,

jumped a little.

Runa smiled again.

“But if you’re seeking Satsuki-sama, like I am, there’s room for us to work together, isn’t there? I think that, as fellow gifted, there’s a lot we could cooperate on.”

Reaching for the desk, Runa lifted up a notebook with a black leather cover.

“Satsuki-sama’s notebook. I can’t read it myself, but if we had Kamikoshi-san there helping us, I’m sure...”

“Hands off Satsuki’s notebook.”

There was ice in Toriko’s voice. It was about as cold as it was when she warned those thugs at the beach in the other world. I watched, thinking she might open fire at any second. Runa took her hands off the notebook, her smile never fading. The Thank You Woman behind her carefully took it from her.

“I’m fine either way. Because, to tell you the truth, even without Kamikoshi-san’s eyes, we may still be able to read it.”

“What do you mean?”

Runa pointed to the Thank You Woman.

“She did the research for me. If we go to the Blue World, we can probably read the notebook there.”

There were a number of files open on top of the desk. Photocopies out of books, handwritten notes on loose leaf, photos and diagrams, and more were all scattered there. Were those the contents of the Thank You Woman’s bag?

“I don’t know the way there, but you do, right? There’s a gate at Kozakura-san’s house, too, isn’t there? If we can go to the other side through there, we can read the notebook. Then we can call Satsuki-sama.”

“Why would you listen to a headcase like—”

I was being snarky, but Runa cut me off.

“Don’t make fun of my mom!”

Mom?

Looking at the Thank You Woman again, there was certainly a resemblance... So she made her mother call her Luna-sama, and wait on her like a servant, but then she still got mad if anyone insulted her?

“Whatever, just give the notebook back. Hurry up!” Toriko said sharply, showing no intent to hear Runa out.

Runa furrowed her brow.

“What do you mean, give it back? Is this yours? It isn’t, right? It’s Satsuki-sama’s. You’ve been treating me like a thief this whole time, Nishina-san, but aren’t you the one trying to take possession of someone else’s things? Pointing a gun at me like that, isn’t this an armed robbery?”

“Shut up. You don’t know a thing about Satsuki.”

“You seem to want to think you were special to Satsuki-sama, but you weren’t, you know? I’ve heard from Kozakura-san. Satsuki-sama had her eye on other girls, too. It’s true you were with Satsuki-sama before she vanished, and maybe you were even the last one to see her. But have you ever imagined what Satsuki-sama was doing without your knowledge?”

“Shut up...!”

“Aw, are you mad? Well, I’m right, aren’t I? Kozakura-san and Kamikoshi-san won’t bring it up because they feel bad for you, but everyone knows. You do, too, and you just don’t want to admit it, right? Satsuki-sama threw you away. Because you weren’t good enough for her. If that weren’t true, she’d have taken you with her, now wouldn’t she?” Her tone was pitying, but only her tone. *“You poor thing.”*

Toriko said no more. She lowered her gun with a more violent movement than usual, then clenched her fists and strode towards Runa.

Uh-oh. She’d let the blood rush to her head.

“Toriko! You can’t get close!”

My warning came too late.

The two Fourth Kinds at Runa’s feet got up, and leaped at Toriko. The Fourth Kind with the broom-like limbs wrapped around Toriko’s lower half with his

countless fingers and toes.

“Let go!” Toriko pounded him with the butt of her AK. There was a dull thud, and the sound of fingers breaking. He let out a pathetic wail, but did not let go.

The big-headed Fourth Kind lumbered towards her. The eyelash-like growths that rimmed his swollen head shone in the moonlight that came in through the skylight.

I instantly turned my shotgun towards him.

...It's no good, I can't shoot. I'll hit Toriko. I gotta get closer.

I dropped the shotgun there, and rushed towards Toriko as I drew my Makarov. There were countless fingers wrapped around Toriko's right arm, and her AK fell to the ground and rolled. The big-headed Fourth Kind was closing in.

“Why you...” Toriko pressed her translucent hand against the big-head that was closing in.

He let out a shrill cry.

There was a silver handprint left in the indistinct features of his massive face. That print which shone like a puddle was clearly causing the Fourth Kind great pain.

He stumbled and backed away. Maybe she noticed the effect, because Toriko quickly stroked the fingers grasping her with her left hand. There was a cry of pain from her feet, and countless fingers fell to the floor. The many-fingered Fourth Kind shrank back, crawling away from Toriko like a mop made of flesh.

With heaving breaths, Toriko turned back to face Runa again.

“Hmm, that hand of yours is pretty awesome, huh?” Runa moved away from the desk she had been leaning on to fall against Toriko's chest. Caught by surprise, Toriko stopped moving. I heard Runa's whispering voice.

“Shh. Calm down, Nishina-san. Let all the stress out of your body...”

From behind her, I could see Runa's Voice, crawling up Toriko's neck like a living creature and quickly entering her ear.

Toriko's knees bent, and her body tilted.

This time, it was my turn to let the blood rush to my head.

“Toriko!”

I caught Toriko from behind as she was about to fall. I could see Runa’s smirking face on the other side of Toriko’s body, and I leveled the Makarov at it.

“Luna-sama!” the Thank You Woman cried. Runa just maintained that slight smile.

“What are you going to do? Shoot?”

“You think this is an empty threat?”

“Really, now? I think you give away too much. Though, if you were planning to kill me, I think you’d have fired already. Nishina-san put down the gun to come punch me, too. You’re both so kind.”

Runa gripped the barrel of the gun pointed at her and tried to move it aside. I gave no ground. Runa got irritated.

“Geez, could you stop getting in my way already? You have nothing to do with Satsuki-sama, right? Fine, I’ll give Nishina-san and Kozakura-san back to you for now. I just want to meet Satsuki-sama as soon as possible.”

“No! Sorawo, you can’t! Don’t let her have Satsuki’s notebook!” Toriko shouted as she stood in my arms, struggling to recover from the effect of the voice.

For some reason, Toriko’s desperation pissed me off even more than Runa’s cocky attitude. I started shouting despite myself. “Every one of you is all Satsuki, Satsuki, Satsuki... Give me a break already! How long are you going to keep clinging to a woman who’s gone?! She’s not even human anymore! That thing’s a monster! The person you knew is never coming back, Toriko!”

They must not have expected my outburst, because Runa and Toriko were both silent for a moment.

That was when I heard another voice suddenly whisper.

“...Satsuki.”

It was Kozakura.

“Satsu... ki...”

Kozakura, who was just sitting in that chair, was holding something shining in the hands that lay on her lap.

I recognized it. It was a cube made of mirrors, five centimeters to a side.

The mirror stone we found when we defeated the Kunekune.

“Kozakura-san... That’s...?”

Kozakura looked up at me from where she sat, a dazed look on her face as she opened her fingers. The mirror stone sitting atop her outstretched hands drew my gaze on its own. We were not reflected in the room its mirrored surface showed.

No...

That’s wrong. There was someone there.

A lone figure, standing in the darkness.

“Sorawo?”

With the effect of the Voice waning, Toriko struggled to stand on her own feet. I hardly noticed as I stared into the mirror stone.

“Sorawo, what’s up?”

“Someone.”

“Huh?”

“There’s someone—reflected.”

Someone, other than us, reflected in the mirror stone...?

As I stared, half in disbelief, I suddenly realized who it was.

I nearly screamed.

The one reflected in the surface of the mirror stone was Satsuki Uruma. Instantly, I turned around. At some point, she had gotten there—right behind me.

“Satsuki is... here,” Kozakura whispered again.

“Sorawo...?”

Toriko followed my gaze. She looked around the dark warehouse, then back to my face.

“...Is it Satsuki? Is she here?”

“No! She’s not!”

My denial was too quick, and too desperate.

“...You can see her, huh?” Toriko said in a whisper.

I couldn’t compose my expression. The cold sensation of destruction caught in my throat, and I was unable to speak, just shake my head.

“You can see her. I’m right, aren’t I?”

What do I do?

What do I do? What do I do? What do I do?

She found out.

I knew it might come out eventually, but I was sure it’d be okay. I thought I could trick her. The words I had feared finally came out of Toriko’s mouth.

“Wait, Sorawo—have you been able to see her all this time?”

You’re wrong. You’re wrong.

The lie I so wanted to tell refused to come out of my lips.

I felt like I was drowning. Only able to manage the shallowest of breaths.

Convinced, Toriko lowered her voice. “I knew it. That’s how it is, huh?”

You knew it?

“It’s been a mystery to me for a while now. Sorawo, you occasionally would get this dangerous look on your face, glaring at something I couldn’t see.”

No way.

“I couldn’t be sure of it before now.”

I tried not to let it show on my face.

“There aren’t many people you’d react to with such intensity, you know?”

I never thought she suspected it.

“Did you think I didn’t realize?”

“Oh, uh.”

“You did, huh?”

The voice she addressed me with was calm. That actually made it scarier.

I couldn’t see Toriko’s face.

Toriko’s face, which was always by my side.

Toriko’s face, which was so pretty I felt like I could stare at it forever.

“Satsuki-sama... is here?” Runa asked from behind me. “Hey! Is she there? Is Satsuki-sama—”

I was so cornered I couldn’t even think what I wanted to: *Shut up. I’ve got bigger fish to fry. Get lost.* The situation was so beyond my capacity to handle, I couldn’t think about anything at all.

“She’s not here! She’s not here! I’m telling you, she’s not here!” I shouted like a child throwing a tantrum.

Two booted feet entered my downcast vision. Still barely able to breathe, I looked up.

There was Satsuki Uruma, clearly looking down at me with her two blue eyes. The next thing I knew, I was flat on my backside. I tried to get away with my legs still weak, and my back hit the desk.

I had faced Satsuki Uruma—or the being that took her form—several times before now. Each time, I had faced my fear. I diligently used my head. One time using my gun, another my right eye, and resolutely ignoring her another... Yet now, I could do nothing. Nothing came to mind.

The moment that Toriko uncovered my lies, everything supporting me just collapsed entirely.

With slow motions that reminded me of a massive deep sea creature, Satsuki Uruma moved her body, looking from me to Kozakura. The long arms covered in lacy sleeves reached out, putting her fingers around the mirror stone in

Kozakura's palm.

"Ah..."

As Kozakura let out that lonely exhalation, Satsuki Uruma lifted up the mirror stone.

No one but me could see her. Everyone was watching the mirror stone as it floated into the air of its own accord.

When it reached the point in front of Satsuki Uruma's face, the mirror stone began spinning like a top on one of its corners. The blue, shining eyes were reflected in its surface. It gradually picked up speed, and as it did, the blue light grew so bright it could illuminate the room.

"Satsuki," Kozakura whispered, and the very next moment, the light burst.

There was a sound like a thunderclap, and the ultrablue flash engulfed everything.

When I recovered from the impact and opened my eyes, I was in a field. Long grass swayed in the wind beneath the dark sky.

It's the other world.

If the time was the same as in the surface world, it was just past four in the morning. Was that purple blur on the horizon because sunrise was coming?

Satsuki Uruma was standing in that grassy field.

Toriko, Runa, and even Kozakura gulped. The Thank You Woman let out a terrified cry, and fell to the ground. The two Fourth Kinds let out indiscernible groans and lowered themselves to the ground.

It wasn't just me. Everyone could see her clearly.

"Satsuki!"

Toriko was the first to shout.

"Finally... Finally, I can see you...!"

Toriko crushed the grass underfoot as she raced towards Satsuki.

No—you can't do that, Toriko.

Even in this situation, my words remained trapped in my throat, not a single one able to escape.

Toriko reached Satsuki Uruma's side at last, and clung to her. But Satsuki didn't react in the slightest.

"Hey! It's me! Hello? It's Toriko!"

Toriko was almost crying. I was shocked by that. Was Toriko this willing to show her weakness in front of Satsuki Uruma?

"I've come for you, Satsuki...!"

Her ungloved left hand took Satsuki's hand. For just an instant, I could see a tense shudder in Toriko's shoulder.

That brought the first reaction. The blue eyes fell on Toriko. Like a massive bird of prey, Satsuki Uruma brought her face towards Toriko.

Ahh. This is no good. Toriko... Toriko's going to be taken away.

My shoulders were frozen with despair when, at that moment, someone suddenly grabbed me.

"Get it together, Sorawo-chan."

Kozakura stood there, grasping my shoulder. Her eyes were focused, like she had finally regained her senses.

"Kozakura... -san."

"That's not Satsuki—not the Satsuki I know!" Kozakura sneered, as if spitting blood, and then collapsed. Moving her arms weakly, as if trying to push me away after I quickly caught her, Kozakura continued. "Move... Quickly! Catch her! Toriko's going to go away!"

Kozakura's shouts gave me the push I needed. I struggled to my feet, nearly tripping over them as I moved. I hugged Toriko's waist from behind, as if I was tackling her, and my momentum brought us both tumbling to the ground.

"Ahhh?!"

As her hand was torn away from holding Satsuki Uruma's, Toriko let out something like a scream.

“Sorawo, hold on—”

“Don’t go,” I said, not wanting to hear Toriko’s protests. “You can be mad at me. You can hate me. But don’t go. You can’t go with her. Absolutely not. You can’t. Don’t go, don’t go, don’t go—”

I felt like nothing I could say would convince her, so I just kept repeating myself. I didn’t want to let her get a word in edgewise. I didn’t want her to tell me to let go.

Toriko looked back at me, bewildered. As I repeated myself, even I lost track of what I was saying. What kind of face was I making now? Was I crying? Was I angry? Or...

Satsuki Uruma looked down at us impassively as we tussled in the grass.

Suddenly, she looked to the side.

Her gaze was on Runa Urumi.

“Satsuki-sama. We meet at last.”

She was saying the same sort of thing as Toriko. Her voice quivered, but it was less with tension, and more with ecstasy at having met the object of her worship.

“I have waited for this day to come for years, ever since I first received your divine revelation. I am your disciple, Runa.”

Satsuki looked down at Runa, saying nothing. Runa went on in an impassioned voice.

“I am your humble servant. Take me with you—to the far side of the Blue World. Take me, and no one else! Please, choose me, the one who loves you more than anyone else!”

At some point, Toriko had stopped moving and, like me, watched as Runa and Satsuki Uruma faced one another. I couldn’t say what was going on, but the tension was rising. Something irreversible could happen at any moment. I was afraid to watch, and afraid to look away, too.

Perhaps sensing that, Runa continued even as she tripped over her own words.

“Do you need proof? Proof that I am one of the chosen ones, the gifted...? I have the qualifications to be with you, Satsuki-sama! Please, listen to the boon you bestowed on me... the Voice.”

Runa took a deep breath. It happened just as she was about to unleash the Voice from her throat.

“Luna-sama, you mustn’t.”

Unexpectedly, it was the Thank You Woman who interrupted her. Up until then, her legs had given out, and she had been trembling in fear, but despite her obvious fright, she crawled towards Runa.

“Please, run away. Can’t you tell? This is the evil eye...! It’s so... vile...”

The Thank You Woman closed the distance between them, holding up her hand to shield her face from Satsuki, as if she were approaching a bright light.

Runa turned around, shouting in irritation.

“What are you doing, you stupid woman?! Don’t get in my way! Stand down!”

The Thank You Woman did not follow her order.

“Satan... You vile bitch... Don’t you dare... deceive my daughter.” Chanting that like some sort of mantra, the Thank You Woman walked in front of Runa. In her hands, she held Satsuki’s notebook.

“Run away. You can’t do this. It’s hopeless. I’m hopeless and finished, too, though,” the Thank You Woman muttered.

“What do you think you’re doing?! You stupid woman—don’t try to act like a mother now!”

Not responding to Runa’s insults, the Thank You Woman opened the notebook and began to read. Here is how I heard the words she spoke: “There was a small gate, and the one person calling the devil finally entered the door, and the flashlight turned on, and off, and on, and off, around, and around, and around...”

A spell? No, this was more nonsensical...

“A and B and C and D were lazy, and urinals, urinals lined up, and people

came, approached, coming, because the creepy voices called before. They called, so it's fine, I opened my eyes and..."

The bizarre words continued without pause, then suddenly stopped.

The next thing I knew, there were a number of figures standing behind the Thank You Woman. There were four white-haired elders wearing what looked like crowns, and they looked down at the Thank You Woman without emotion.

"What's that?" Toriko whispered.

I had a vague understanding of who they were. Or what they came from, to be more precise. They closely matched the portrayal of the unidentified old men who appeared in the net lore story *The Round Hole Underground*.

The men wearing crowns appeared behind the Thank You Woman as she read out of the notebook—it was a composition that almost made it look like she was about to sic her summoned monsters on Satsuki Uruma.

But was that notebook something so kind and easily used?

In the next moment, my worries were confirmed.

The four expressionless old men squinted their eyes. The corners of their mouths turned upwards. Those smiles, which showed their gums, were full of greater malice than I had ever seen before.

The Thank You Woman turned around, and the old men watched with horrifying smiles as she backed away.

With nowhere to flee, caught between Satsuki Uruma and the old men, the Thank You Woman's face filled with despair.

"Run..."

Saying that to Runa one more time, the Thank You Woman balled her hands into fists, and thrust them toward Satsuki Uruma.

It was a hand sign, with her thumb protruding from between her index and middle finger. The warding symbol to protect against the evil eye.

It had no effect whatsoever.

Satsuki Uruma raised both her arms, then sandwiched the Thank You

Woman's face between them. Her thumbs dug deep into her eye sockets.

The Thank You Woman screamed. The blood ran down her cheeks, wetting the grass at her feet.

"Mom!" Runa shouted. "Satsuki-sama—Stop! Why?!"

The old men showed their wrinkled throats, letting out a croaking laugh. They shook with laughter, as though the Thank You Woman's screams after having her eyes crushed were too hilarious not to, then collapsed like paper that had been wadded into a ball and vanished into the void.

There was a bubbling of blood, and then the screams stopped.

Satsuki Uruma released her grasp, and Runa's mother collapsed powerlessly.

"Satsuki... -sama..."

As Runa Urumi stared vacantly upwards, Satsuki Uruma's bloody hand reached out for her.

There was an incredible scream. That scream, filled with something like the pain and terror of being skinned alive, made me and Toriko cover our ears despite ourselves.

"He... lp..."

The Voice released from Runa's throat looked twisted, like barbed wire. At the end of it, the two Fourth Kinds were still cowering on the ground. The Voice wrapped around them, and dove inside their bodies. The Fourth Kinds rose, groaning. The many-fingered one crawled towards Runa, and the other one began rubbing the air with his swollen head.

The Voice was soon replaced by a gurgling sound. When Satsuki Uruma let go, Runa shook her head back and forth sluggishly, standing where she was. Her back was still to us, so I couldn't see the look on her face.

The many-fingered Fourth Kind finally reached Runa's feet. His fingers sought out Satsuki's shoes, wrapped around them, trying to snake from her ankles up to her thighs. The Fourth Kind's back swelled up, and countless hands and fingers burst forth from it with explosive force. The other parts of his body continued spreading out across the ground. It was as though a tree made of

human parts had suddenly sprouted. The tree of meat grew high, writhing and convulsing in pain, then suddenly blacked at its furthest extremities and began to wither. There was a sprinkling sound as the nails fell from his rotten fingers.

The big-headed Fourth Kind was shaking his body around wildly. His head struck the air where there was nothing, creating silver waves as it did. The thin hairs around the circumference of his head connected those waves, eventually beginning to form a gate. I could see the dark warehouse on the other side of that silver phosphorescence.

“Toriko—Let’s run!” I said, and Toriko seemed to snap to her senses as she looked at me. If she resisted at this point, I was ready to punch her out and drag her with me, but Toriko bit her lip and nodded.

“Kozakura-san!”

I turned around, and Kozakura was down on the ground, covering her head.

“Are you okay?!”

“No... I can’t take any more of this... Get me out of here quickly...” the powerless whisper came back. For someone with as little resistance to fear as Kozakura, this situation had to be utter hell.

Toriko and I supported one another as we got to our feet. Runa was still standing there, in front of Satsuki, beneath the tree of meat.

“Runa! You alive?” I asked hesitantly. Runa slowly turned to look at me. When I saw her face, I gulped.

Her mouth was open wider than I had ever seen. Her lower jaw had fallen, and her tongue lolled out of it. That face, drooling, with her eyes rolled back into her head, had lost all sanity.

Raising her arms and thrusting them out before her, like some sort of zombie, Runa began shambling towards us. It was like she was trying to get as far away from Satsuki Uruma, who was behind her, as she could.

Toriko and I looked at one another. There was no need to talk. In an instant, we knew we had both thought the same thing.

We had to save Runa.

Ten minutes ago, I would have been able to abandon her without much hesitation. I mean, if you think about it with a clear head, she was our enemy. For me, she was the head of a cult, and for Toriko, she was—no, even if I decided not to think about that aspect, there were still way too many things about her that pissed me off.

Still, I couldn't abandon her.

It was the Thank You Woman who changed my mind. When I heard the scream Runa let out when Satsuki Uruma killed her mother, I just couldn't...

Toriko and I took a firm hold of Runa's arms and pulled. Though she still had that crazy look on her face, with her jaw open so wide it might get dislocated, Runa fell towards us.

I looked back over my shoulder. The gate that Runa's slave—the big-headed Fourth Kind—had opened was already more than large enough for us to pass through.

"Sorawo, you take Kozakura!"

"Got it! You go on ahead!"

I left Runa to Toriko, and rushed to Kozakura's side.

"We're running! Stand up!"

"I can't."

"...Okay, fine then. Hold on."

Kozakura hugged me tightly. With her arms around my neck, I could stand up and lift her. By pure chance, I ended up carrying her like a princess. Thanks to her being the size of an elementary schooler, even with my muscles, I could still just barely manage to do it. It may not have been elegant, but I stumbled forward with my legs spread wide, and rushed through the gate.

It being a direct gate with almost no interstitial space saved us. I walked two, three steps on the boundary between worlds, and was able to return to the surface.

"Sorawo, hurry!" Toriko shouted from the surface world. It was as I was rushing to her side. There was an intense pain in the back of my head, pulling it

backward.

As Toriko looked at me, her face stiffened with surprise. Raising her head from my chest and looking over my shoulder, Kozakura got the same look on her face.

“Satsuki...”

That one word uttered by Toriko told me everything about the situation.

Satsuki had grabbed the hair on the back of my head.

The hair I had let grow so long I could tie it back.

The hair on the back of my head, which Toriko and Kozakura had liked so much.

The hair that, the more it grew, the more it made me look more like Satsuki Uruma. That hair.

“Toriko, pass!” I shouted, and Toriko’s eyes widened as she seemed to regain her senses. I shook free of the arms Kozakura had wrapped around me, and threw her little body towards Toriko.

“Eek!”

Kozakura screamed as she traced a short parabola in the air, and Toriko caught her just short of hitting the ground.

During that time, I pulled out the knife I had stolen from one of the male cultists, and unsheathed it.

I put my hands behind my head, and put the blade to my hair.

The knife had a good edge to it.

Slice, slice, slice. Three cuts, and my head was free. The excess momentum sent me stumbling forward, and Toriko and Kozakura both grabbed me, pulling me out of the other world.

I turned back, and my eyes met with Satsuki Uruma’s, who was looking at me through the shrinking gate. I don’t know what she did to our savior, the big-headed Fourth Kind, but his head was crushed into a crescent shape, and a black bodily fluid oozed from a hole I couldn’t be sure was a mouth or a nose as

he convulsed.

I saw Satsuki Uruma's lips moving, so I responded.

"No, I mean, it was red that day."

Satsuki Uruma spoke again. I vigorously shook my head.

"No, I did not promise, and if I cut it loose, I couldn't live, and horned faces would come flowing, wouldn't they? Then there would be a trial, right?"

"Sorawo?"

"I do not know when the end will come, but that is unforgivable as a person, right? Because I can not forgive that."

"Sorawo! What're you saying, Sorawo?!"

"When I burn, and only my bones are left, I will definitely come—"

I was conversing with Satsuki Uruma, but that came to a sudden end when I was slapped on the cheek. The next thing I knew, Toriko had grabbed my shoulder, and was looking closely at my face.

"...Toriko? Why did you hit me...?" I asked in a daze as I slowly came to my senses.

What was I saying just now? During the conversation, it totally felt like it had meaning. Over Toriko's shoulder, I could see the gate shrinking. The shining blue of those evil eyes faded out of view, and the hole in space completely closed.

Toriko turned back, too, looking at the place where the gate once was.

I remained tense, worrying that Satsuki Uruma might reopen the gate and come after us, but after a minute or so, I was able to convince myself she wasn't planning to for now, and I was finally able to let out the breath that I had been holding all this time.

Stumbling, I put my hand down on the desk. The Thank You Woman's files were still on top of it. Satsuki Uruma's notebook and the mirror stone were both nowhere to be found.

The light of the morning sun shone through the skylight at a shallow angle,

illuminating the upper part of the wall. The shadows near the floor remained thick. I leaned on the desk, slowly sitting down.

Runa Urumi lay at my feet. She was in a bad state, but still breathing. Her face looked so bad, Toriko took off her jacket and placed it over top of it. Then, pulling out her phone, she asked Migiwa to arrange for a doctor or nurse.

While I idly listened to her, Kozakura sat down to the left of me. “You came to save me, huh, Sorawo-chan?”

“I guess I did, yes.”

“I did, too, Kozakura,” Toriko added, having finished her call. Kozakura shook her head.

“I thought you two didn’t care what happened to me.”

“Nuh-uh. That’s not true anymore,” Toriko said.

“...Well, we couldn’t leave you now,” I added.

“What do you mean, ‘anymore,’ you idiot? You’re making me cry here.” Kozakura laughed weakly.

“Sorawo, um, your hair...”

Toriko reached out, stroking my disheveled hair.

“It’s just gone back to its original length,” I said. Toriko nodded, seemingly satisfied with that answer.

Come to think of it, in the self-responsibility series of ghost stories, one thing listed as a common feature of them was a depiction of someone cutting their hair short to escape from a curse. When I noticed that I had acted in accordance with the ghost story without realizing it, I felt kind of uneasy.

“Sighhhh. Maybe I’ll cut my hair, too...” Kozakura grumbled.

Unsure what she meant, I didn’t know how to react. Kozakura turned her neck until it cracked, then let out a deep sigh.

“I’m at my limit. Hold on... Sorawo-chan, lend me your lap...”

Before she had even finished speaking, Kozakura laid her head down on my thighs, and closed her eyes. I could feel the tension fade, and her body go limp.

“Kozakura-san...?”

I called her name out of concern, but all that came back was the sound of deep breathing. I didn't know if she'd passed out, or gone to sleep... Whichever it was, she didn't need first aid, so I kept leaning back against the desk.

Toriko sat down next to me, on the opposite side from Kozakura. The conversation came to an end, and we remained silent for some time. I was the first to open my mouth.

“You're not going to get mad because I kept quiet about Satsuki-san, huh?”

There was no answer.

“Even if you do, I have no intent of apologizing. It's crazy, trying to follow her.”

“...”

Toriko remained silent. She didn't react to my comment at all. I went on, saying whatever came to mind.

“I'm glad you came quietly when I suggested we run. If you'd said, 'But—!' or 'Let me go!' I was planning to deck you one.”

“You? Hit me?” Toriko let out a listless laugh.

“Is that weird?”

“A little, yeah.”

“I was serious.”

“Yeah. I know.”

Is that really true?

“You've slapped me plenty of times before now. Like, that time we almost died from the Kotoribako, I think you really went to town on me then.”

“I think so, too. I mean, I got this left hand because I slapped you after the Kunekune got you. You were talking nonsense again just now, so my hand moved before I could stop myself.” There was something competitive about the way Toriko said that.

“You’re pretty violent, you know that, Toriko? You going to become a domestic abuser?”

“No... Isn’t that kind of an awful thing to say?” Toriko pursed her lips, sounding hurt by the suggestion, so I decided not to follow up on it any further.

“...When you took her hand, I thought it was over,” I said, and Toriko raised her face to look at me. “You met the person you’ve been longing to meet all this time. My lies were uncovered. I thought, it’s over, she’s through with me...”

“That’s not true at all, Sorawo. Not true at all,” Toriko shook her head. “Satsuki was important to me, of course, but you’re already important to me, too. We’re accomplices, aren’t we? You could trust me a little more, you know?”

I hadn’t expected those words. I felt like there was something warm throbbing deep inside my chest.

“But—is it okay? I mean, I...”

“It was cold,” Toriko said all of a sudden.

“What was?”

“When I took Satsuki’s hand...”

Toriko rubbed her left hand as she spoke.

“Her hand was cold... so very cold. It felt like there was no blood flowing through it. It wasn’t like that the last time I saw her,” Toriko said, seemingly bewildered by her own words. “To be honest, I was mad at first. But when it looked like you might be taken away, Sorawo, all of that went out the window. Just the thought that I might lose you, too... It was maddening... I was s... scared.”

As Toriko stuttered, I reached out and offered her my hand. “How about mine? Is it cold?”

Toriko looked me in the eye, then looked down to my hand. Then, gently, she gripped it in both of hers.

“It’s warm,” Toriko said in a hoarse voice, and brought my hand to her mouth.

Her lips brushed the knuckle of my index finger.

“Thank you, Sorawo—I love you.”

When Toriko closed her eyes and whispered that, the warm breath that leaked through her lips brushed my fingers and the back of my hand. That sensation, which raced down the length of my arm, felt numbingly sweet.

Works Referenced This work uses many preexisting true ghost stories and pieces of net lore as its motif. In particular, this section will note those which have been used directly. This will touch on the content of the main book, so if you are concerned about spoilers, please tread carefully.

File 9: Yamanoke Presence There was a report of the “Yamanoke” on the 2channel message board’s Occult/Paranormal Phenomena Board in “Shinu Hodo Share ni Naranai Kowai Hanashi wo Atsumete Minai?” [Do You Want to Gather Ridiculously Scary Stories?] thread 157 (there are two threads with this same number), posts 167-169 (2/5/2007). In the Q&A with the thread denizens (continues to ~189), the reporter indicated the encounter happened “on the prefectural border between Miyagi and Yamagata.”

After that, there were those who analyzed the Yamanoke from an anthropological angle, and some who appeared talked about local legends of a “Yamanoke” or “Yamanokai,” but none of them went beyond vague references.

File 10: Sannuki-san and Karateka-san “Sannukikano” was reported in the thread “Fukakai na Taiken, Nazo no Hanashi *enigma* Part 49” [Incomprehensible Experiences, Mysterious Stories *enigma* Part 49], post 665 (1/16/2009). A monkey-like creature appears in the yard, and uses “something like telepathy” to say “Sannukikano (?) will be coming, so show her

this. If you say you took it yourself, she will give you one, too. Bury it in the yard afterward.” The creature then left a tooth (likely human) with the poster.

Two days later, between 1/18 and 1/20, in posts 728-788 of the same thread, the story continued. The old woman named Sannukikano appears and gives the poster a new tooth, which they bury. They also upload pictures of the teeth.

Later, on 1/21, in post 812, they uploaded a picture of an amulet to protect oneself from Sannukikano. To the denizens of the thread, this suggests that the entire sequence of events was someone “trolling.”

However, because the host has vanished, the image can no longer be seen. Because of that, we can no longer confirm the declaration that they were “trolling.”

In net lore, where stories can unfold over months, it happens from time to time that the original poster is impersonated by an entirely different person. In those cases, unless the original returns to point out what has happened, it will go undiscovered. Even if they do, and the impostor says, “No, you’re the real impostor,” proving who is who is difficult. In the case of “Sannukikano,” the person who posted in post 665 and the person who posted two days later in post 728 could have been two different people (they had different poster IDs).

In this series, I have chosen not to use stories that have been clearly declared to be fictional as motifs. In looking at the thread history, it’s a pretty grey area as to whether I can categorize “Sannukikano” as a true ghost story, but I decided it couldn’t be completely written off as fiction.

Furthermore, one of the titles that I also referenced in volume 2, Toshiki Agatsuma’s *FKB Kaiyuuroku Kikimimizoushi* [FKB Record of Ghosts and Apparitions: Strange Tales] (Takeshobo, 2015) has a story titled “Zannuki.” This is another experience narrative where hearing the incomprehensible rumors of a person named Zannuki causes a calamity to occur. Because it felt creepy that not just the name was similar but the overall pattern of events as a whole, I referenced it as well.

File 11: The Whispered Voice Requires Self-Responsibility On

the 2channel occult board, the first “self-responsibility type” story, which infects the reader, was posted in “Shinu Hodo Share ni Naranai Kowai Hanashi wo Atsumete Minai?” [Do You Want to Gather Ridiculously Scary Stories?], post 379 (10/27/2000). This thread was unnumbered, but it was effectively part 2, after the original thread grew too long and needed to be split.

However, this story was brought to a standstill by interference from the denizens of the thread and the appearance of impostors. Thread denizens who already knew the story “spoiled” that it was a horror story that dragged in the audience, but that revelation was vague, and it was unclear where the story had been told before.

Two years later, in “Shinu Hodo Share ni Naranai Kowai Hanashi wo Atsumete Minai? Part 13” [Do You Want to Gather Ridiculously Scary Stories? Part 13], posts 504-572, there was a similar story from someone who claimed to have found a similar story from 1997 on the “Haiki Chokuzen Q8 BBS Log.” From that point onward, a series of stories with similar elements, which would come to be called “self-responsibility type” or “Yamanishi type” stories, would be posted on occasion.

Because there are many stories, I would like to direct you to “Jikosekinin Kousatsu Saito (Kari)” [Self-Responsibility Analysis Site (Temporary Name)] (<http://www.geocities.jp/zikosekininkei/>) but... there’s an issue. Look at that URL again. It’s GeoCities. Yahoo! announced that all GeoCities sites will be shut down on 3/31/2019. Unless it is moved to another domain, this site is fated to vanish only a few months after this book is published. In fact, the investigative thread on the Shitaraba BBS that is linked to on the analysis site is already long gone, and the discussions that would have happened there are lost.

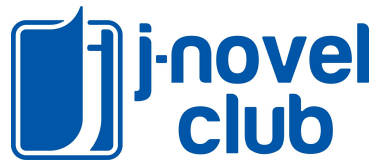
“Chika no Maruana” (The Round Hole Underground) was posted to “Kowai Hanashi Toukou: Horaa Teraa” [Scary Story Submissions: Horror Teller] (10/20/2009). The otherworldly speech of the Thank You Woman that appears in my story has been pulled from here and shuffled around.

“Yama no Bokujou” (The Farm in the Mountains) references a report found in *Gendai Hyaku Monogatari Shinmimibukuro Daishiya* [Modern-day 100 Stories, Shinmimibukuro, The Fourth Night] (Hirokatsu Kihara/Ichirou Nakayama, Kadokawa Bunko, 2003). This is an unusually famous true ghost story that has been covered on the radio and in magazines on several occasions, so I believe many people will be familiar with it. Additionally, there is an exceptionally detailed after-story recorded in Ichirou Nakayama’s *Kaidangari Magamagashii* [Ghost Story Hunter: The Ominous House] (Kadokawa Horror Bunko, 2017).

I know I always say this, but there are many other true ghost stories and net lore from which I have taken direct or indirect influence.

Furthermore, as I already somewhat touched on in the section on self-responsibility type stories, I would like to write about the administrators of sites on net lore and analysis, as well as the participants on those sites. These kinds of sites, which gather logs and the debates surrounding net lore—and would otherwise quickly become unsourceable—have taken on an important role in the culture of horror stories on the internet. It is a great loss to see many of these places being lost to service terminations. The administrators of the sites were the ones who cut the various net lore from their original threads and gave them titles, and the participants on these sites and the denizens of the original threads the ones who saw connections between the different pieces of net lore. It’s inevitable that these places will eventually go away someday, but we must not forget just how much influence they’ve had on the scene.

Thank you for always enjoying and being frightened. I hope this book is able to repay my gratitude in some small way.



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Otherside Picnic: Volume 3

by Iori Miyazawa

Illustrations by shirakaba

Translated by Sean McCann

Edited by Krys Loh

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Iori Miyazawa

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